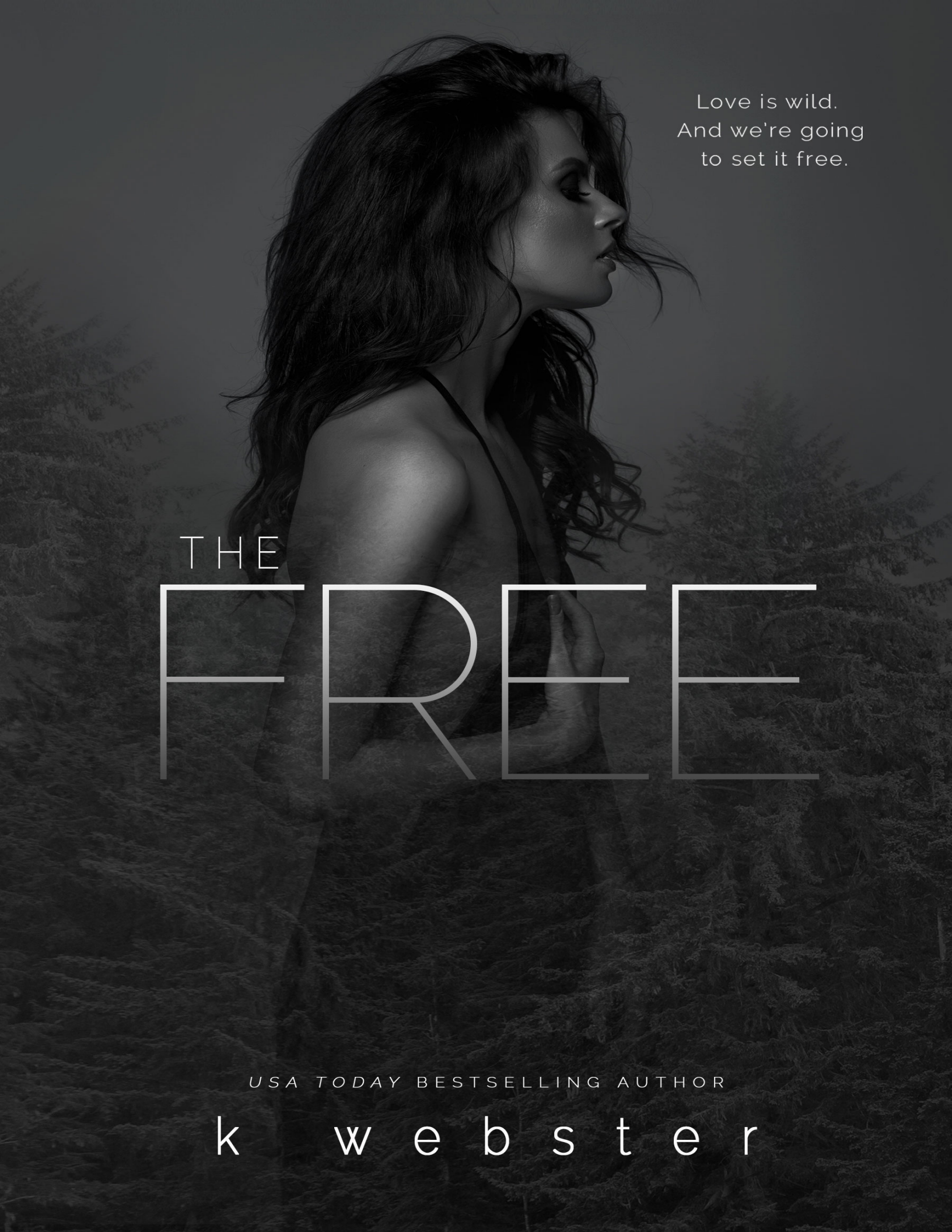


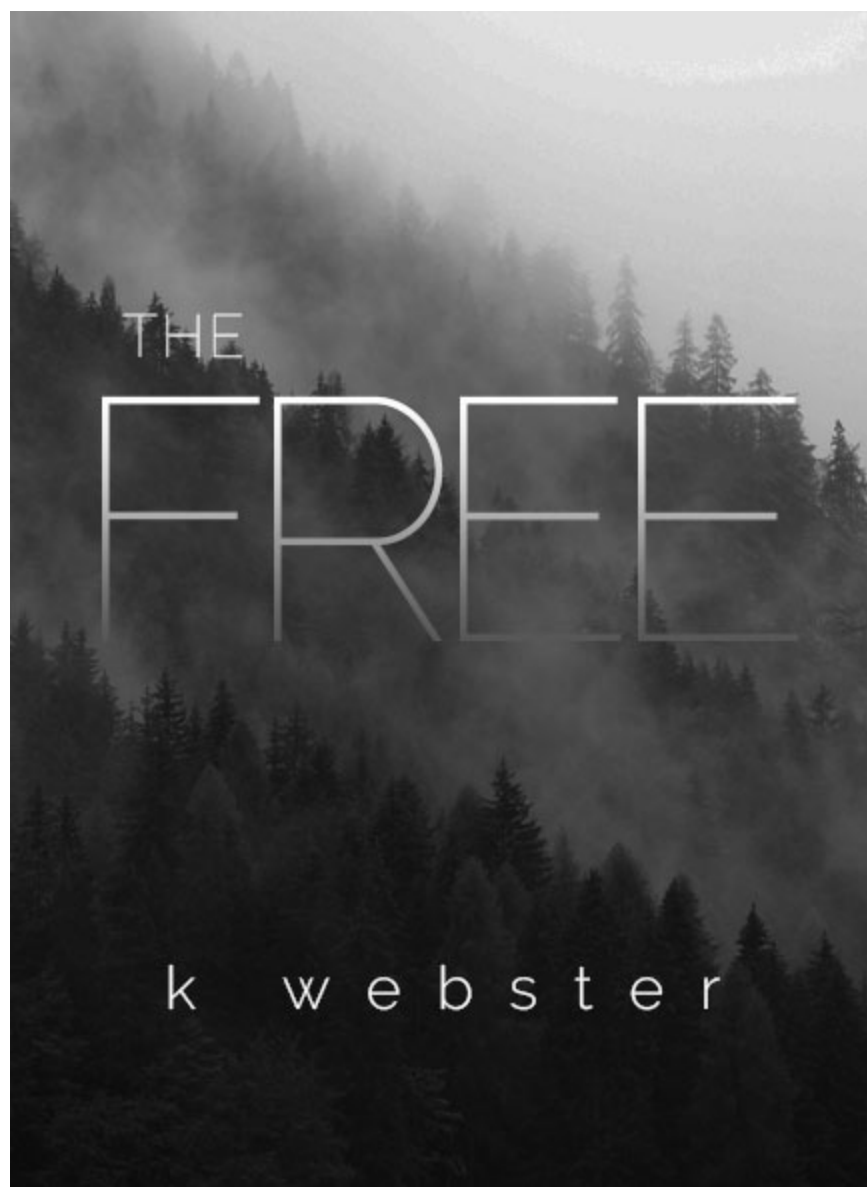


Love is wild.
And we're going
to set it free.

THE
FREE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

k w e b s t e r



OceanofPDF.com

The Free

Copyright © 2019 K Webster

Cover Design: All By Design

Photo: Adobe Stock

Editor: Emily A. Lawrence

Formatting: Champagne Formats

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information and retrieval system without express written permission from the Author/Publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

OceanofPDF.com

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Warning](#)

[About this Book](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Playlist](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
[About Author K Webster](#)
[Books by K Webster](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

DEDICATION

To my husband,
Thank you for loving the wild within me.

To my wild readers,
Your unconditional love for forbidden romance, specifically *The Wild*,
has inspired me, changed me, and driven me to keep writing from the
heart...
even if not everyone understands, likes, or approves.
It's easy to be brave when my readers are even braver.
For your fearless willingness to explore the wildness in my mind, I'll be
forever grateful.

OceanofPDF.com

“Maybe some women aren’t meant to be tamed.
Maybe they just need to run free until they find someone just as wild to run
with them.”

—Carrie Bradshaw

OceanofPDF.com

Warning:

***The Free* is a taboo story. Extreme sexual themes and violence in certain scenes, which could trigger emotional distress, are found in this story. If you are sensitive to taboo themes, then this story is not for you.**

OceanofPDF.com

He took me from the wilderness.
I was all alone and death was near.
His plan was to heal me and then let me go.
A reprieve from my harsh reality.

Food. Warmth. Safety.
Just us.
It's temporary and one day I'll be forced to go home.
But I don't I want to go back.
I want him to keep me. To tame and love me.

Freeing the wild comes with grave consequences.
He thinks they'll cage him for being with me.

Our love's not right.
They won't understand it.
Forbidden. Immoral. Perverse. Vile.

I don't care what they think.
It should only matter to us.
We are innocent and beautiful and worthy.

Love is wild.
And we're going to set it free.

PROLOGUE

eve

The Past...

My eyes well with tears as John and Ezekiel dig a hole for Esther. My sister wasn't but three years older than me and we were close. The boys—Ezekiel, John, Solomon, and Nathaniel—all had Papa. Mama passed on two winters ago when illness struck. So Esther and I only had each other.

Ezekiel took the only thing I had in this world away from me. I knew it was him. He's the only one who could make her scream that way. As if he could reach inside her tiny body and steal her soul. My brother stole everything from her, including the light in her eyes.

"You're the woman of the house now, Eve," Papa tells me, his squeeze on my shoulder gentle. I'd seen him touch Esther in ways I never wanted to be touched. I've always been the baby. The one nobody ever paid any attention to. I don't want to be the woman.

The moment Esther began bleeding between her thighs, the men in our family started stalking her much like the mountain lions do when they're hunting. Papa began teaching her how to be a wife. She never shared what those teachings were, but they took place in his bedroom and she cried the entire time.

I'm all alone.

It's my turn to cry.

Ezekiel doesn't appear to be upset as he rolls Esther's cold, stiff body into the hole. This is all his fault. Had he not carried on his own teachings, she'd still be alive. His teaching had been too brutal and he'd somehow hurt her inside of her body. All I know is the blood was coming from someplace

it wasn't supposed to. She and I'd sobbed until she turned pale. Until she stopped moving. Until she left me.

"I'm going hunting with the boys," Papa tells me, his voice gruff. "Since you're the woman of the house now, you get to sleep in my room. Tonight, we'll begin your teachings on how to become a wife."

A hot tear rolls down my cheek and I nod.

Once Esther is buried, they take off with their weapons. The wind is brutal and unforgiving. I shudder and walk into our home. It's quaint—only the two rooms—but the fireplaces are warm. I remember being a little girl and curling up beside Mama in her room she shared with Papa. She'd show me pictures of her and Papa. When they were small too. Back when they lived in town with my grandparents. Mama and Papa were brother and sister too. But Papa wasn't ever cruel to Mama the way Ezekiel was to Esther. I'm worried Ezekiel will hurt me too.

I slip into my new room and worry about what Papa will teach me. Esther was never happy about it. My heart aches because I miss her terribly. Sometimes I wish I could just run far, far away from here. That a nice bear would befriend me and let me live in his cave. I smile as I pull out the pictures of my parents when they were kids from the small tin can on one of the river rocks on the fireplace.

My brown eyes are the exact shade of my mother's. Esther had her mouth. Mama was pretty when she was younger before her teeth began falling out. I can't help but run my tongue over my teeth. I've lost them over the years, but mine always grow back. I wonder why Papa's and my older brothers' teeth never come back.

After I've looked through all the pictures, I stuff them back into the tin. I'm just dozing off when I hear voices. Heavy footsteps thunder my way. When Ezekiel pokes his head in, I glare at him.

"Papa spoke to me while hunting and he believes he's too old to be a husband any longer. Since I'm the eldest, he wants me to teach you how to be a wife." His dark brown eyes narrow to slits as he regards me. "You're nothing but a kid, though. You haven't even started bleeding yet."

"I hate you." My hissed words seem to infuriate him.

"Esther used to say the same thing and sounded just like you," he snarls as he stalks into the room and leers at me. "Maybe you're not a kid after all."

I hug my knees to my chest and pray Papa will make Ezekiel go away. I start to shudder when he takes another threatening step toward me.

“Ezekiel,” Papa barks out as he enters the room, his Bible clutched tight in his grip. “What’s going on in here?”

Ezekiel has the sense to look shameful. “Nothin’, Papa. I was telling little Eve how wonderful it was that she’s a woman now.”

Lies.

Papa frowns at him. “Go on, boy. Eve and I need some time alone.”

Reluctantly, Ezekiel leaves and closes the door behind him. I remain frozen in fear. Papa begins undressing until he’s naked. His manhood isn’t hard like I’ve seen my brothers’. It remains small and limp amidst a bush of white hair. Papa isn’t bronzed and sculpted as if from stone like my brothers. His skin hangs from his bones and brown spots litter his flesh.

“Take that smock off and come sit.” His dark brown eyes flicker with anger as he sits and pats the furs beside him. “Our teaching begins with Genesis 3:16.”

I’m afraid, but him educating us with Bible passages isn’t anything new. I tug off my garment and toss it to the floor. My skin burns with embarrassment. I don’t want him to see me like this. To my surprise, he doesn’t look. Simply holds his hand out to me. I take it and sit beside him. His soft, wrinkly skin is warm against mine as he hugs me to his side.

“I named you after Eve in the Bible,” he explains softly. He begins telling me a story where she was tempted by a snake and lured Adam to partake in the forbidden fruit alongside her. “Soon you will understand your namesake,” he tells me and then begins reading a passage that makes my skin crawl. “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.”

He sets the Bible down and grips my jaw, forcing me to look up at his bearded face that has white curls—that match the ones surrounding his manhood—mixed in.

“I’m your husband now, Eve. There are no other wives left for me to take but you. And while you’re young and not ripe for childbirth, you’re still very much female. Soon, your body will change and adapt to satisfy your husband. To satisfy me.” His fingertips are brutal as they dig into my flesh. A tear leaks out, but he’s not bothered by it. “Tonight, I will begin my rule over you. To teach you how to please your husband.”

I cry out when he easily pushes me down onto my back. Papa is giant in comparison to my small body. Like a mountain lion trying to mount a fox. It doesn't work. It's not right.

"Papa," I choke out. "Please. I'm afraid."

He wrenches my thighs apart despite my struggling and settles himself against me. His manhood is no longer soft. The wiry hairs that surround it tickle my bare flesh. I don't understand what's happening. Does it please him to rub his naked flesh against mine? Is that how females please males?

My questions only seem to multiply when he spits in his dirty hand. I stare down in fright when he gets his hard length wet with his saliva. Over and over again he does this until it easily slides up and down in his grip. Then, his terrifying glare is on me. I've never seen Papa with such a ferocious look in his eyes. Like when a bear once attacked my brother Solomon. Hungry. Territorial. Fierce.

"Your screams will lessen with time," Papa tells me.

That's the only warning I get before excruciating pain assaults me. Papa is entering a place I had no idea existed. He's ripping me apart with his manhood. Stabbing me the same way Ezekiel plunges his knife into the animals he attacks. Deep and unforgiving.

My screams don't lessen.

They grow louder with each passing moment.

Louder.

Louder.

Louder.

Until I can't scream any longer.

CHAPTER ONE

atticus

The Present...

I've gotten used to Reed and his family. At first, I was resistant. I'd wanted to get the police involved, but I'm not a fucking home-wrecker. Devon, while slightly brainwashed looking, was happy.

Happy then.

Happy now.

And their kids...

Jesus Christ, I love them like they're family.

I remember asking Reed not long after I discovered they'd had the accident and were surviving with the barest of essentials if they wanted to go back to town. *"They won't understand or approve of our love. Our only chance for survival is here. The love we have is wild and that's where it belongs."* At the time, I'd been rather annoyed that he'd chosen to keep his daughter out in the wilderness, but I'd respected their decision to stay. It wasn't until a few months ago when Reed and I had a little too much to drink that he blabbed about Devon not being biologically his. I wanted to slap that motherfucker upside the head for not telling me the minute I warned him of incest. I'm still a little pissed that he let me think the worst. He's still technically her father as far as legalities go, and that's still fucked up, but the possibility of birth defects evaporated and a weight lifted from my shoulders.

"Rowdy," Devon hollers from upstairs. "Can you bring Mommy Ryder's blanket?"

Rowdy—the kid lives up to his name, I swear—continues to throw punches at me like he’s some tough little badass. At three and a half, he has more energy than all the adults combined. Reed smirks at me. Ronan, around a year old, is passed out in his arms.

“Boy,” Reed finally grunts. “Better go help your momma.”

Rowdy whines but runs off.

“When I get ready to build again,” I tell my friend, “your old ass better be ready to help me.”

He snorts. “City life getting boring?”

“I hardly call where I live city life.”

He rolls his eyes and kisses the top of his son’s head. My chest aches. I’m almost forty and I’ve yet to find a good woman to settle down with. The ones outside of the city are too wild. The ones in the city aren’t wild enough. But Devon and Reed have me longing for what they have—aside from the creepy father-daughter shit.

“Have you seen Eve lately?” I ask as I pull my overgrown hair into a man bun that Reed likes to give me shit for.

His brows furrow together. “Ran across her before winter when hunting. Gone by the shack a few times, but she wasn’t there. I don’t know where she’s gone to.”

We’re both somber for a few moments. If she’s out there away from her shack, there’s no way she can survive the elements. Eve reminds me of my sister Judith. Our family almost lost Judith under my watch. I was twenty and she was ten. I’d been stalking a fox when I heard the splash. She’d fallen into the river and got swept off. It happened so quickly and had I been near her, I could have snatched her right up. Instead, it took my family and me almost two days to find her. We were sure we were looking for a body. Eventually, I found her in a small crevasse in the mountain on the brink of death. She doesn’t remember it to this day, but Mom, Dad, and my two brothers all remember.

And me?

It haunts me.

Fucking plagues me.

All it took was a second.

“Devon’s pregnant,” Reed says abruptly, pulling me from my thoughts.

I shake my head at him. Those two fuck like bunnies and keep pumping out these damn kids at every turn.

“She just had Ryder like three months ago!” I exclaim.

He smirks and shrugs. “When you live in the wild, you don’t have birth control.”

I roll my eyes at him. “I put a box of condoms in each of your Christmas stockings.”

His laughter is infectious. “Rowdy uses those as water balloons.”

“Ridiculous,” I grunt.

We launch into a discussion about a treehouse he wants to build for the boys, when Devon tiptoes downstairs. She’s all smiles as she kisses Reed and takes the sleeping toddler.

“You guys keep it down. I got both boys asleep upstairs.”

I tip my head at her and Reed winks. Once she’s gone, he rises and heads over to the kitchen. Everything is rustic in their home, but I brought them real shit to use. Couches. Beds. Sinks. They don’t have running water, but Reed makes the painstaking journey each day to fetch it for them. Devon, the brilliant chick she is, has been reading up on water retention and purification. She’s convinced by next summer she’ll have figured out how to recycle snow and rainwater so Reed doesn’t have to haul it in so much.

He snags a bottle of Jack—another Uncle Atticus gift—and fetches his coat. I grab mine and follow him outside. The winter air is frigid, but it doesn’t bother us as we sit on the porch swing. We pass the bottle back and forth.

I’m about to take a swig when I hear crunching.

My eyes dart to Reed’s in the darkness and he rises, pulling his .45 from his jeans pocket. I stand too and search the darkness. Despite the fence we built, it doesn’t mean bears will stay out. It’s always in the back of our minds.

We both suck in a sharp breath when the gate creaks open.

Familiar messy brown hair is what I notice first. I bolt from the porch and charge through the snow to get to her.

“Eve!”

Something’s not right. She limps and a terrifying moan rips from her chest. And the blood. Fuck, there’s blood all over her.

I jerk her into my arms and scoop her up. She won’t tell me how old she is, but I’m guessing she’s around sixteen now. The girl is short and nothing but bones. I think Rowdy weighs more than her. She sobs against my neck as she clutches my coat. Her tattered clothing hangs off her brutalized body.

Once I get her inside, I carry her to the floor near the fireplace. Reed storms in behind me and I can hear him rooting around for the first aid kit.

“Look at me, Eve,” I order, my voice tight with emotion. It’s like when I found Judith. On the brink of death. Helpless. Broken. “Eve. Look at me.”

Her brown eyes flutter open and they’re sad. I feel like she’s giving up. I stroke her dirty hair from her face and start ripping at the fabric to see where she’s hurt. Once I tear apart her clothes, I can assess the damage. Blood coats her abdomen. Long, deep gouges slash across her flesh. Her breasts are so small and her stomach concave. Such a fragile little thing. The bones on her body protrude everywhere. There’s no way a small girl like herself can survive such a brutal wound.

Reed kneels down beside me and starts threading a needle. “Clean her wounds,” he barks out.

I shake away my daze and set to pouring alcohol on a clean rag. When I dab at the gash near her breast, she cries out, tears spilling from her eyes.

“Shhh,” I coo. “We’re going to fix you.”

Reed’s jaw clenches and I understand what he doesn’t say.

She won’t make it.

Fuck.

I need her to make it.

“Please be strong,” I beg as I carefully cleanse her. “Please.”

Her eyes roll back and she passes out the moment Reed starts stitching her up. He works quickly but not very neatly. I don’t care, though, as long as he closes up those gaping holes in my little friend’s body. We manage to get her to choke down some over-the-counter painkillers too. After nearly a half hour of stitching, he’s done. I’m careful as I wrap her with gauze. Once we’re sure she’s not going to die on us, I scoop her in my arms and take her to the guest room Reed and Devon keep for me for when I visit. Reed yanks back the quilt so I can lay her down. I pull the covers back over her so she’ll stay warm.

“We need to keep an eye on her. If she hasn’t improved by morning, you probably should take her into town to the hospital,” Reed utters, reluctance in his voice.

It’s the last thing she’d want.

“She’ll improve,” I assure him, my teeth grinding to dust. “She has to.”

He gives me a clipped nod before slipping out of the room. I undress down to my boxers and climb into bed next to her. Wrapping my massive

body around her tiny, fragile one, I warm her. She's blue and icy to the touch. I just need her to get better.

Her breaths are ragged and raspy. I worry about her lungs and her heart and everyfuckingthing.

"Stay alive and I'll bring you all the fruit you could ever dream of," I vow, pressing kisses to her temple. "Stay alive, little one. For me."

She turns her head slightly and her eyes crack open. Her hand shakes as she touches my scruffy face. My heart leaps at her movements. I want to squeeze the life out of her, but one hug from me could probably do just that, so I refrain.

"Fruit," she rasps, her lips dry and cracked.

I kiss her right on the mouth because it's the closest part of her to me. "Yes, Eve, fruit. Just hang in there for me."

Her eyes flutter closed, but a smile quirks up her lips on one side. This girl never smiles except when fruit is involved. My little Eve. For three and a half years I've looked out for this girl. I sure as hell won't stop now. Not when she's out there all alone. I'll protect her. Eve needs me.

And goddammit, I need her too.

"Fruit," she whispers, and my heart leaps in my chest. "Atticus..."

CHAPTER TWO

eve

“Eve.”

The sound is rich and throaty. Like the sound of a bear grunting as he plays with his cubs. Deep and rumbly. Possessive yet loving.

In my dreams, I always ran away to live with the bear in his cave. He was a nice bear despite the claws and teeth. I could burrow up against him for warmth and he simply held me.

“Eve.”

I crack my eyes open and a sharp searing pain rips across my chest. I’m thrust into reality where I remember that real bears aren’t cuddly or sweet. They are ferocious. Feral. Hungry. And the bear I happened upon when I was checking my rabbit trap wanted to devour me. He was giant and determined. But I’m small and clever. The big beast managed to swipe his sharp claws across me, but I slipped away from him. Always quiet and light on my feet. I disappeared into the night.

“Eve.”

The voice is familiar and relentless. Deep down, I know who it is. It was him I’d sought as soon as I knew my injuries were too grave to treat on my own. I wasn’t sure he’d be at Reed and Devon’s big home on the hill, but I’d hoped they would know how to contact him.

Atticus Knox.

I’ve hardly said more than five words to him in the past three and a half years, but I’ve come to know him as someone safe and trustworthy. In the wild, the people you come across aren’t always that way. They steal from you or hurt you. They try to own you.

I belong to no one.

Reed Jamison made sure of it the day he ripped my brother Nathaniel from my body and slaughtered him in front of me. I was certain he'd kill me too, but he didn't. And while he frightened me, that all changed when Devon gave birth to Rowdy in my home. The way he treated her and loved her was something I'd never experienced before.

Reed didn't rule over Devon.

If anything, it was as if she ruled over him.

It made no sense and went against everything Papa and my brothers taught me about marriage. When Papa and Ezekiel were killed, John claimed I was his wife, but he let Solomon and Nathaniel take turns. I hated my father and brothers with a passion. When Reed murdered them all, I felt free. No man would ever lay claim on me again.

"Eve."

I'm exhausted and my chest is on fire. My toes still feel frozen. And I'm in the warmest, softest, best smelling bed I've ever been in. I'm not eager to wake from this dream. To wake up all alone, cold to the bone, in my little shack. I shudder at that thought.

"Eve."

My stomach cramps and I'm reminded that my cycle is due. I remember heavily menstruating the night Devon had her son in my home. I was terrified Reed would notice. That he'd try and mount me like my father and brothers had. But he never did. His eyes only ever saw Devon, which was fine by me.

When Atticus came along, I was terrified. I even tried to stab him. He'd been gentle with me, though. Regarded me with the kindest eyes I'd ever seen. All my fears lessened when he smiled. He had teeth. Bright, shiny, white teeth. A mouthful of them. Prettiest mouth ever. It wasn't until he began dropping in on me from time to time that I began to trust him. Fruit. Always fruit. Eve was tempted by fruit in the Bible, so it's fitting I'm the same way.

Sweet. Syrupy. Delicious.

The best thing I'd ever tasted.

My stomach groans.

"Fruit," I croak, my voice sounding foreign to my own ears.

I manage to open my eyes and two glittering green orbs bore into me. Like the hot summer days when I lie on the riverbanks and stare into the sky. The sun is severe and blinding but warms me to my core.

Atticus's eyes are that way.

They soak into me. Heat me. Burn me in ways that feel good.

I like his eyes on me.

"How are you feeling, little fox?" His voice is deep and it seems to rattle the bed.

My cheeks heat under his intense gaze. *Better now that you're here, big bear.* I don't say those words, though. I don't say anything. Instead, I study his face. Something about his face is hard to look away from. His hair is the color of honey straight from the combs. Rich, golden, perfect. He sometimes pulls it out of his eyes in a silly knot on the back of his head. It fascinates me. I want to tug the band that holds it in place away so I can run my fingers through it to see if it feels as soft as it looks. Unlike Reed and my family, Atticus's face has less hair. The hair is clipped short so you can still see the bones in his face. His jawline is sharp and his cheekbones pronounced. The nose on his face is strong but has a slight bump in the middle. I want to touch that too.

But I don't.

I never touch him despite my cravings.

He's a man.

What if he wants to make me his wife?

A shudder ripples through me. Atticus is larger than Reed or Ezekiel. His shoulders are every bit as wide as the bear that attacked me last night and he's nearly as tall. Muscles upon muscles are what make up Atticus Knox. He's both beautiful and terrifying all in one breath. If he wanted to mount me and teach me how to be his wife, he could. Easily. After three and a half years of being free, I'd belong to someone again. The pain would come back.

Another shudder.

"Eve," he coos, his voice soft like the underbelly of a rabbit. "I'm here. I will protect you and look after you."

His warm words calm my stuttering heart. He isn't touching me in any awful ways, so I greedily steal the moment. Sometimes, from afar, I watch how Reed strokes his fingers along Devon's cheek. How she leans into his touch and meets his gaze with a smile. I've watched them for years and I've never seen him hurt her. The sounds that come from their cabin when he mounts her are ones of pleasure. Like when you sink your teeth into a juicy berry and a moan slips out.

Just. Like. That.

Warmth curls deep in my belly despite my injuries. I can't say I hate the feeling. It's a tingly feeling that seems to ripple through my body.

"You have to get better," Atticus murmurs. "For me."

My gaze falls to his full lips. They're pink and look soft. Without thinking, I bring my fingers to his mouth and touch them. His breath hitches and he regards me with a frown. Perhaps he doesn't like it. Feeling chastised, I pull them away. He presses a kiss to my nose and a strangled sound escapes me. Papa and my brothers would kiss me often, but this doesn't feel like punishment. It feels like a reward. Before I can consider his actions, he climbs out of bed.

I've never seen anything so mesmerizing.

I knew he was muscular, but I hadn't seen him without his clothes on. Now, he's wearing nothing but some tight black underwear. His back has artwork drawn all over it and a pang of jealousy cuts through me as I wonder if his wife drew it on him. I never considered that maybe he has a wife. It would certainly explain why he didn't mount me.

He jerks on his clothes as if he's angry, with his beautiful back to me. Eventually, his art becomes hidden when he pulls his shirt on. When he steals a glance at me, his eyes seem worried.

"I'm sorry, Eve," he says, his throat bobbing. "I'm going to have to do something you're not going to like."

Terror wells up inside me. It doesn't make any sense. If he's going to mount me, then why did he put his clothes back on? Where is the hunger in his gaze like Papa's and my brothers'? I'm confused when he leaves the bedroom completely.

I try to sit up, but it hurts too much. Hot tears roll down my temples.

Beyond the walls, Atticus and Reed are arguing. These walls aren't thin like the ones at my shack. I can't hear like I want. Why are they angry?

A few moments later, Atticus storms in with a scowl on his face. Reed follows behind him, his nostrils flaring. Panic assaults me and renders me immobile. Are they going to take turns mounting me like Nathaniel and John used to do?

"P-Please..." I choke out.

Reed glowers at Atticus. "She doesn't want to go."

Atticus growls like the bear that attacked me. "Goddammit, Reed. She's feverish. I've waited for four fucking days for her to get better, but it's not."

Four days? I thought it was one.

He continues, "There's infection, I'm sure of it. She needs a doctor."

Most of his words are gibberish, but I get the gist. He wants to take me away.

"They'll put her in child protective services. Eve can't survive in that world," Reed bellows. Despite the sharp tone, I feel like he's trying to protect me.

"She'll die if we don't do something. I can't..." Atticus pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes. "I won't let her die."

My panicked gaze dances back and forth between them. I nearly stop breathing when I see the resignation in Reed's brown eyes.

"Promise you'll bring her back the moment she's better," he pleads.

Atticus nods at him before turning his attention on me. He sits beside me and takes my hand despite my attempt to pull it away.

"You're not getting better," Atticus tells me, his voice firm. "I'm going to take you someplace where they'll give you medicine."

I shake my head. "N-No."

His jaw clenches. "I'm sorry, but I won't take no for an answer."

A screech rips from me when he slides his strong arms beneath me and lifts. The pain across my chest is intense. The more I move, the more it hurts. Defeated, I choke on my sobs as Atticus carries me through the house. I feel eyes on me—most likely Devon and the children—but I can't meet their gazes. I'm wounded and weak. I'm at this man's mercy. He carries me to his truck. It's big and black and terrifying. Papa used to tell me stories of his father's truck. A metal contraption that takes you to far places so you don't have to walk.

I don't want to go anywhere far.

I want to stay here.

But I'm powerless to fight against him. He lays me down in the back seat before he climbs into the front. The truck roars to life and within minutes we're moving. I try to sit up, but I can't move. All I can see are the trees rushing by at an alarming speed.

I want to claw at him and demand he take me back, but I'm too tired.

From the simple exertion of screaming, I'm depleted of my energy. With a sob, I close my eyes and hope that wherever we end up, no one tries to keep me as theirs. I don't want to be kept.

I want to be free.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

atticus

Eve sleeps peacefully in my bed while I pace my bedroom and panic. Taking her to the hospital was out of the question. They'd demand answers I didn't have to give. And quite frankly, Eve would have been traumatized as fuck. Which is why I called in a favor to a friend.

Suma Walkingstick and I go way back. My parents used to hire the Native American woman to watch over us during the summers when they'd travel to California. Suma is wise and known for having remedies for everything. Even local doctors have called upon her when modern medicine doesn't do the trick. But it isn't her healer ways that had me dialing her number, it was desperation. If anyone could help her and keep it discreet, it was Suma.

"This paste will help the infection on the surface. The elixir we made her drink will help beneath the surface," Suma explains. Her dark brown leathery skin is a contrast to Eve's pale white flesh. "The paste must be applied four times a day. It will burn and itch, but it needs to be applied." She clicks her tongue in disapproval. "The stitching your friend did isn't right, Atticus. It needs to be pulled out soon. Until then, keep the child comfortable."

I swallow and nod. "Is she going to be okay?"

Her black eyebrows furrow together as she regards me with the palest blue eyes I've ever seen. My brothers Will and Vic used to tease me that Suma was a witch. "The Wild burns in her veins. When we forced the elixir down her throat, I saw into the windows of her soul. She's untamed. The child doesn't fit in the world we know. Once she's healed, you need to free her."

I bristle at the thought of letting Eve go back out into the wilderness where she's practically defenseless. I'll cross that bridge when I get there. "Thank you."

The short old woman waddles over to me and takes my cheeks in her hands as she looks up at me. "Anything for you, son."

I lean down so she can kiss my forehead. Suma and I grew close after Judith nearly died. I blamed myself for not watching my sister. Even after she was fine and back home, happy as could be, I held onto that guilt. Suma taught me how to release that from my mind. Explained that the dark thoughts that owned me were evil in nature. That I was too good to allow the darkness to steal me. Eventually, I learned to work through that guilt with her help.

Leading her out to my porch, I watch with a frown as she climbs on her old bicycle and rides away through the snow. Suma lives six miles from me and refuses to let me drive her anywhere. That old woman will live to be a hundred easily. Nobody her age is in that good of shape.

An owl hoots in the distance. It will be dark soon. At night, the wilderness comes to life. I'm still twelve miles away from town. Close enough for amenities and to see my family, but far out enough that I don't hear the buzz of people. Trees surround my modest home. It's peaceful here.

I slip back inside and lock up. My home isn't large. I don't require a lot of space being that it's just me. I have a living room with a single recliner because I don't ever entertain guests. But what I do have, that I find difficult living without, is electricity. The television mounted on the wall looks ridiculous in the space when not turned on, but it's pretty badass when I can watch football in high definition.

Walking past the living room, I make my way into the small kitchen. A refrigerator, stove, and microwave are about it in here. I have a small table with two chairs in one corner despite always eating alone. I'm thankful to have the other chair because Eve will have a place to sit. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and make my way back to my bedroom. The shower calls to me as it always does after spending time camping. It's one of the reasons I couldn't live like Reed and Devon. I love a hot shower more than anything in this world.

I rip off my clothes once I'm in the tiny bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror as the shower heats up. The scar on my right shoulder is a living

reminder of why I live out here in the woods rather than in Colorado playing for the Denver Broncos. Gritting my teeth, I tear my gaze from the mirror and step under the hot spray. The water cleanses away the body odor and dirt buildup of a few weeks with Reed and his family. I scrub until I feel raw. And fuck does it feel like heaven to be able to wash my hair again. Once I'm good and clean, I stare down at my cock. Thick and limp. I hardly get an erection anymore. The last two I'd had were when I was staying with Reed and Devon. Those two fuck all the time. And I'll be damned if hearing them have sex didn't make my dick hard. Embarrassing as shit having to whack off into one of my dirty T-shirts.

The water eventually grows cold and I climb out. I snag a plush towel and tie it around my waist. I'm just sauntering out of the bathroom, water dripping from my hair, when I notice Eve's awake. Her eyes are open as she stares up at my ceiling. Suma had rubbed the green paste all over Eve's chest wounds and ordered me to leave it open so it could dry the paste. My gaze falls to Eve's chest. Her breasts are small and her nipples are hardened pebbles. When my cock thumps against my leg, I tear my eyes from her and rush over to my dresser. *I did not just get a semi looking at a teenager's tits.* With a growl, I yank it open and locate a pair of loose boxers to sleep in.

When I turn around, she's watching me. Her brown eyes flicker with distrust and fear. I run my fingers through my wet hair and motion around me.

"This is my house. You'll be safe here." I point at her chest but don't break eye contact. "A nice lady friend of mine treated your wounds. We need to apply the paste four times daily so you'll heal. Are you hungry?"

She winces in pain and nods. "Fruit."

My lips tug into a half smile. Of course she wants fruit. Little Eve loves her fruit. Her only request ever. I stride through my house and set to pouring two cans of fruit into a Tupperware bowl. I snatch a fork and head back to my bedroom. Eve tries to sit up and I growl.

"Don't do that."

Her nostrils flare, but she obeys. When I sit beside her on the bed, she's tense. Using the fork, I cut the peach slices into bite-sized pieces. Then, I stab one before bringing it to her cracked pink lips.

"Open."

Her mouth parts and I feed the fruit into the opening. A sound of pleasure rumbles from her. Again, my cock thickens against my thigh.

Ignoring the blood rushing there, I feed her until all the fruit is gone. Once I've put the bowl up, I assist her in sipping from the bottle of water. I can tell with every grimace that she hates accepting my help. Eve is independent and fierce. She must feel like a prisoner in her own body.

"Time to rest, Eve."

I flip off the lights before crawling in bed next to her. This will be the fifth night I've slept by her side. Ever since she collapsed in Reed's yard, bloody and on the brink of death, I can't bring myself to leave her side. I feel responsible for her. Eve has no one. She needs someone.

Her breathing is soft in the darkness. Despite the central heat that warms the space, her body is cool to the touch. The fever has let up, thank fuck. I wrap my arm across her lower torso and press my hot body against hers to warm her. The tension melts away as she accepts my gift of heat. Soon, we both fall asleep.



"More," the brunette begs as she holds onto the headboard. "Please."

Her tiny pale ass just begs to be bitten and marked. I give it a good slap before driving hard enough into her that my balls slap against her bare pussy, making a loud smack. I tangle my fist in her dark locks and yank her head back. She moans and soon her body is shuddering around my cock. My orgasm explodes from me with a groan.



I wake to the early morning birds chirping outside the window. Today, despite the hour, it's dark out, which means more goddamned snow. A yawn escapes me and I take stock of my situation. Bile creeps up my throat when I realize my boxers are drenched. I had a wet fucking dream. Came in my

shorts like a damn teenager. All of that would be bearable if not for the fact my thigh is pressed against Eve's core. Her legs are parted to accommodate my big leg.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

My heart is thundering in my chest. I'm a fucking pervert. I just came with my dick pressed against a teenager's hip. I'll be forty damn years old in April. What the hell is wrong with me?

She stirs and I remain still. I'm too horrified to move. If she falls back asleep, then I can creep out of here. I'm planning my escape when she starts clawing at the skin on her chest surrounding the gashes.

"Eve," I bark out suddenly, my voice hoarse from sleep. "Don't do that."

She ignores me and continues scratching. I snag her wrist and clutch it tight. When she starts in with the other, I grip it too. Pinning them both to the bed, I glare at her.

"I said no."

Her brown eyes flame with fury. It's the most life I've seen in her eyes since long before the accident when I saw her last. I try to ignore the fact that my wet boxers are smashed against her bare flesh.

"It itches," she hisses out, her nostrils flaring.

My gaze softens. "I know, but you can't scratch it. It'll hurt."

"Are you going to mount me?" Her words are but a whisper.

It takes me a moment to register what she's asking. I jerk away from her as though I've been bitten by a snake. In my haste to jump from the bed, I knock the quilt to the floor. Her naked body in my bed speaks to my cock, which doesn't understand rules. It rises of its own accord.

"W-What?" I demand. "No. I'm not going to...mount you." Even as I spit those words out in disgust, a quick image flits in my head. One where she's healed and I'm buried deep inside her. I'm sickened that I would think such a horrible thing about a girl. "Fuck. Fuck!"

She goes to claw at her skin again. It distracts me from the giant fucking boner I have going on and I once again pounce on her. If she reopens those wounds, it could be bad. She squirms against my hold. Using my body weight, I pin her to the mattress. Between us, her chest heaves from exertion. Like the stupid fuck I am, I glance down. Her tits are perky as

ever and her nipples still hard. I close my eyes and attempt to shake away the vision.

“Are you going to mount me?” She asks the goddamned question again that has me going fucking mental. Instead of flipping out, I pop my eyes open and glare at her.

“No, Eve. I’m not some sick rapist.”

She relaxes and her features soften. If she notices that my cock throbs against her thigh with need, she doesn’t let on. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now can you hold still and let me apply more paste?”

She nods and bites on her bottom lip in a nervous manner. Fuck if that shit doesn’t go straight to my dick too. I slide off the bed and throw some jeans on because I need more of a barrier between us than my wet boxers. Once I’m covered, I bring the quilt back over her thighs to her hips, averting my eyes from between her legs. My gaze dances across her nipples again and I want to punch myself in the fucking face for having zero self-control. I snag the bowl of paste from the end table and scoop out a glob on my fingertips. Her breath hisses when I begin spreading it across the gashes. My pinky brushes against her nipple and I have to close my eyes to stop any feral sounds from escaping my throat.

What the fuck has gotten into me?

This is Eve.

Little fox.

Not some goddamned plaything.

Once I finish, I flash her a quick smile. “Rest up. I need to take a shower and then I’ll get you some fruit.”

Her entire face lights up as she smiles—wide, bright, beautiful. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Eve smile like this. Fucking ever. I’m so taken aback by it that I stumble away from her. It isn’t until I’m in the shower under the hot spray that I realize my obsession with her has bloomed into something forbidden. I lean my forehead against the cold tile and grip my aching cock. My eyes close as I attempt to bring forth the brunette I’d been dreaming about when I unexpectedly came. I jerk at my dick as I think about her ass and the bones on her spine. Her dark hair. I’m getting close when the girl in my vision turns around to look at me. Deep brown eyes. Soulful as fuck. Eve. With a choked grunt, I release my orgasm and my seed spurts against the tiled wall.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck!

I start scrubbing my body forcefully as punishment to myself. The last thing I need is to be fantasizing over Eve. She's still a kid, for fuck's sake. Whatever stupid fantasies are in my head cannot leave this shower. They need to slip down the drain and straight into hell where they belong.

I can't think about her like that.

I can't.

I just fucking can't.

When I dry off and throw my jeans back on sans underwear, I saunter into the room, expecting her to be asleep. Instead, I find her staring at me. Her big brown eyes aren't angry or frightened. They flicker with curiosity. With a grunt, I make my way over to my closet and snag a T-shirt off the hanger.

"It's warm here," she murmurs.

I halt and turn to regard her. "Do you think you can get up today?"

She starts attempting to sit up, so I rush over to her. Together, we manage to get her into a sitting position. Her chest looks awful, but it's not half as angry as it was before. The paste is already helping.

"I need to..." Her cheeks burn bright red. "Go." Her gaze darts to the window. And by go, she doesn't mean leave. She needs to pee.

"Can you walk or should I carry you?"

"Carry me."

I ignore the fire burning through me as I scoop her tiny body into my arms. She weighs nothing. I bet she barely breaks a hundred pounds on the scale. A yelp escapes her when I sit her on the toilet.

"Cold!"

Laughing, I release her and take a step back. "It's a toilet. You relieve yourself into it. That's toilet paper you use to clean up with and then that little lever is to flush it all away."

Her eyes are wide and her lip is slightly curled up. "Where does it all go?"

"Through pipes to a septic tank."

"What's a septic tank?"

I'm about to open my mouth when I hear tinkling in the toilet. Like the sick motherfucker I am, I can't help but glance down between her thighs.

Her urine streams out and my dick is fucking hard in my jeans again. I back out of the bathroom, clipping my shoulder on the frame before stumbling into the room.

“Call for me when you’re done,” I bark out and stalk away. I run my fingers through my still wet, wild hair. I’m losing my damn mind. Bringing her here, after going so long without sex or the touch of a woman, was a bad idea. I need to get her well and dump her ass back at Reed’s. I start slamming drawers on the hunt for a T-shirt.

I’m still beating myself up when I hear the toilet flush. She lets out a choked sound, which has me rushing back into the small bathroom. Her eyes are teary as she stares at the mirror.

“Esther?” Her fingertips reach up and she touches the glass.

I come up behind her and frown at our reflections. “It’s a mirror. Like when you see yourself in the river.”

Understanding dawns in her eyes, but not before a tear snakes down her dirty cheek. I hand her the giant white T-shirt.

“Put this on and then we’ll get some food in you.”

She allows me to help her dress. I’m mindful of her gashes and keep my eyes diverted. Once she’s dressed, I lock my arm around her tiny waist and slowly guide her to the kitchen. She’s quiet, but I can see her taking everything in. Outside, the snow falls heavy and thick, but we’re warm inside. I sit her at the table with a can of fruit and then start on making her something hot.

“I don’t have many perishables since I’ve been gone for a while, but I’ll pick some up next time I go to town. I hope you like oatmeal.” She’d probably do better to have real steel cut oats, but all I have is the instant shit I loved when I was a kid. I choose the apples and cinnamon flavor for her and set to making it. Once I finish, I place the steaming bowl in front of her.

I make some coffee for the both of us. I’m not sure if she’ll like it or not, but I think the caffeine could do her some good.

“What is this?”

I turn to see her devouring the oatmeal. Her eyes are bright and happy. It eases the tension in my shoulders. My T-shirt swallows her. Her skin is dirty and bloody—a stark contrast against the clean white shirt. I’ve brought the wild home and she stands out against everything in the clean, sparse home.

“Oatmeal. You like it?”

“More,” she pleads, her voice a needy whisper. With her eyes on me like that, I go back to losing my damn mind.

I set a steaming mug of coffee, that I mixed in extra sugar and cream since she appears to love sweet shit, in front of her. “Drink this. I’ll make you more oatmeal.”

The sounds of pleasure coming from her as she sips the hot liquid warm me. It gives me satisfaction to show her new things. By the time I’ve made her a second bowl of oatmeal, she’s downed the entire cup of coffee. Her eyes dart around all over the place, curiosity evident in her features.

“If you’re feeling up to it, you’re free to explore,” I tell her. “Just stay inside. You’re hurt and we need to get you well.”

“Free.”

I let out a chuckle when she starts inhaling the oatmeal. I’ll need to add that to the grocery list since she’s such a fan. Absently, she scratches at her chest and it reminds me that her stitches need to come out. The thought of seeing her naked again fucks with my head. When I go to town to get groceries, I’ll have to find one of my fuck buddies to get my mind off this bullshit for a while.

“I need to clean your wounds,” I tell her, my tone gruff. “Then maybe you could shower.”

Her nose crinkles and I’ll be damned if she hasn’t ever looked cuter. “Shower? Like rain shower?”

I chuckle and take her empty dishes to the sink. “Something like that, but warmer.”

After I grab my first aid kit and a giant bottle of rubbing alcohol, I set them on the table and kneel in front of her. “Shirt needs to come off.”

Instead of removing it, she lifts her arms, her brown eyes boring into me. I grit my teeth but gently take her shirt off. With extreme focus, I begin cleaning away the paste and dirt and blood with the alcohol. She whimpers and cries but doesn’t push me away. Once she’s clean, I grab the small scissors and begin the tedious task of cutting out the stitches. It takes over an hour, but I manage to free her from them. Already, after one day of having the paste, her wounds are much better. Bringing her here so Suma could treat her was a good decision. Even if my dick keeps trying to make bad ones.

“Shower,” she reminds me.

I smirk. “You’re a woman who knows what she wants and isn’t afraid to ask for it.”

She reaches forward and touches my teeth. “How come your teeth don’t fall out? Like Papa’s or my brothers’?” I think this is the most I’ve ever heard her speak all at once.

I snort. “I brush them.”

Her eyes widen in horror. “Will mine fall out?”

“If you don’t keep them clean, it’s inevitable.”

She swallows. “Clean them in the shower?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” I say with a chuckle. “But nothing you can’t handle on your own once I show you.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

eve

This place is strange. Clean and warm and free of threats. It's filled with the most delicious foods and the clothing is soft. Best part is, Atticus is here. His scent is everywhere. He smells one part like the pine trees but also a scent I don't know. It smells good, though. His eyes are always on me. They flicker with fire—the same fire Papa and my brothers had sometimes. It makes me wonder if he wants to mount me and take me as his wife. The thought isn't a bad one like with my family. With Atticus, it makes my belly burn with want. It makes me curious to know what his mouth tastes like.

Just thinking about his mouth has me ashamed. He cleans his teeth, which is why they are so bright white like fresh snow on the first day of winter. I want mine to be clean too.

"I'll get you your own toothbrush," he tells me. "For now, we can share mine."

His strong grip is once again on my waist. The shirt he gave me hides my body from him. I don't like wearing it, despite it smelling like him, because he can't look at my body with that hungry stare I've come to enjoy. But having his hands on me, like now, is better than his eyes. I like the way he's gentle with me but powerful enough not to let me fall. We make it into the small room where the toilet is, and he once again stands behind me. Our gazes meet in the mirror.

Atticus is beautiful. His skin golden and his hair silky. Compared to my dark, matted locks, he looks like what I imagine the angels in Papa's Bible to look like. It embarrasses me because I don't look like him. Mud and blood are crusted on my face and in my hair.

His body is hard and hot pressed against my back. I can feel his manhood poking into me. My eyes meet his and I'm fascinated when his cheeks turn ruddy as though he doesn't want me to know his manhood is ready to mount.

"I'll go first so you can watch me," he murmurs, his voice husky and scratchy.

I pay special attention to the way he squeezes some blue paste onto a tiny brush. He brings it to his mouth and begins vigorously scrubbing. Foam spills from his mouth into the bowl under the mirror. He reminds me of the animals that sometimes get the madness. But he winks at me and it causes a flash of heat to course through me. He spits into the sink and then turns a lever. Water comes out and he rinses the brush. Once he's all clean, and his teeth certainly sparkle now, he hands me the brush. I hold it steady while he squeezes more blue paste out. Mimicking his actions, I start scrubbing. The paste makes my mouth cold, but I like it. Actually, I love it. I scrub and scrub until I'm foaming from the mouth too. I'm mad. Positively mad. I giggle and nearly choke on the foamy paste.

I spit and rinse like he did. My mouth feels clean and smooth and refreshed. "Can I do it again?"

He chuckles and it reminds me of how Nathaniel would laugh when he was a boy. Soft and playful and warm. "After every meal if you want. But now we need to get the rest of you clean. Just take the shirt off and bathe under the hot spray." He turns on the shower and then leaves me alone.

I'm not sure about this shower he speaks of, but I do as I'm told. I take off the shirt and pull the cloth to the side to peek inside. All white smooth rocks of some sort. Steam billows around me. When I reach out and the hot water pounds into my hand, I shriek.

Atticus storms back into the bathroom, the concern for me rippling from him. I'm comforted by his presence.

"I-I don't know what to do. Does it hurt? Can you teach me?"

His green eyes blaze with an emotion I don't understand, but finally he grunts in agreement. He stares at my breasts for a long moment before he shakes his head. "I need to find my swim trunks."

I frown in confusion. "Why? Are we swimming?"

"Actually," he grunts. "It's fine. Just...just don't look."

He unfastens his pants and they fall to the floor. His giant manhood springs to life. I watch in awe as it bounces out in front of him. Points at me

as if it knows me.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he's going to mount me and make me his wife. But earlier, he'd gotten angry. The thought that maybe I'm too dirty crosses my mind. For once, I'm disappointed to not be wanted. I sulk as I step into the shower. His massive body joins me and I'm forced under the hot spray.

I've never felt anything like it.

I moan as the heat rushes over my dirty skin. His manhood pokes against my hip. We stand there for a long moment, his body pressed against mine in the small space and the hot water cleansing me. My breath catches in my throat when he squirts something cool on top of my head. Then, his long, strong fingers are massaging it into my scalp. I moan in pleasure.

"I'm washing your hair," he explains, his voice but a whisper. "We might have to wash it a couple of times. You're lucky I have long hair. I only buy the expensive shit."

I have no idea what he's talking about and I don't care. All I care about is the way he makes my body thrum to life with just his fingers. He truly is an angel from the Bible. I'm completely lost in this wondrous dream as he tends to me. Scrubs and rinses over and over again. Eventually, he claims he's finished and hands me a slippery white block.

"Soap. Use it to wash away the dirt," he tells me.

When I frown at him, he chuckles. "Just rub it all over your body."

I bite on my lip but obey him. The soap smells good and I like how it feels on my flesh. His manhood is still hard and expectant. I wonder how it will fit. If it will fit. Will he be gentle like Solomon sometimes was? Will he be brutal like Ezekiel?

"You're crying," he whispers, his fingers lifting my jaw.

I blink away the tears. "Will it hurt when you mount me?" Boldly, I reach down and grasp his manhood. "It's so big and I'm so small."

He lets out a choked sound as he backs me against the wall. The fire in his eyes lights a fire within me. "Eve, baby, you can't touch me there," he growls. "Please." And yet his hips slightly buck against my grip as if my hand is the best thing he's ever felt.

"Will it hurt?" I try again. I'm fascinated with the way his manhood jolts in my grip.

He leans his forehead against mine and grinds his teeth. "It won't hurt because it won't ever happen." Slowly, he pulls away from my grip.

“Fuck.”

My chest aches in disappointment. “Why don’t you want me to be your wife?” I don’t understand the way I feel inside.

“You’re like sixteen or some shit, Eve.” He scrubs at his face with his palm. “I’m almost forty.”

He’s worried about my age? My family never worried about these things.

“But your body wants mine,” I argue, my gaze falling to his manhood that is very much still alive. “Your manhood is ready for me.”

“My cock,” he corrects, “has a mind of its own. I shouldn’t be showering naked with you, Eve. This is wrong.”

He slips out of the shower and leaves me alone. The rejection crushes me. Tears, much hotter than the shower water, burn down my cheeks. I stand there silently crying until the water shuts off. Atticus, now fully dressed, pulls the cloth away and holds up a giant warm blanket. Reed and Devon have these same ones.

“Dry off. These are towels,” he tells me, his eyes diverted to the floor. “Get dressed. I want to show you something.”

After he leaves, I use the towel to swipe away the water droplets. I put on a new, clean shirt that smells like him. He’s left more garments, but when I try to put them on, they swallow me and won’t stay on. Eventually, I give up. When the steam melts away from the mirror, I’m shocked to see the woman staring back at me.

Clean.

Wide brown eyes.

Full lips.

I’m still amazed at how much I look like Esther. It’s like she’s here with me. Staring back at me. I hear sounds coming from the other room. When I enter, moving pictures are dancing across a black box on the wall.

“It’s called a television. It’s meant to relax and entertain you,” he explains from his cushy chair. “Now sit and let me brush out that mess.”

With my eyes glued to the television, I watch in awe as people move and talk. Everyone is clean and smiling. I’m amazed. Gently, Atticus begins brushing through the knots in my hair. It feels good—like when he scrubbed my scalp in the shower. I find myself drifting off while he brushes.

“Hey,” he murmurs, waking me from my nap. “You’re shivering.”

He urges me into his warm lap. I curl into his bare chest and bury my nose against his neck. His giant arms wrap around me and I once again fall asleep.



I wake in his bed. He's nowhere to be found. It's dark outside now and a quiver of unease ripples through me. I can hear him making sounds in the other room. Clangs and rattles. My chest is wet with newly applied salve and my shirt is gone. Heat pools between my thighs as I imagine him touching me while I slept. Forgoing the shirt, I use the toilet like he taught me and brush my teeth. I love the cold, clean feeling in my mouth. I'm quiet as I creep out of the room. He's in the kitchen preparing food and it makes my stomach growl.

When his green eyes lift, they flicker with hunger. I love the feral look in them.

"Eve," he grunts. "Where's your shirt?"

"You took it off me."

His jaw clenches. "Go put it on."

"It irritates my wound," I murmur, the lie shaky on my tongue.

All I get is a grunt in return as he goes back to stirring. I'm curious, so I make my way into the room with the delicious smells. Foods I've never seen are boiling.

"Spaghetti," he tells me as if that strange word makes sense.

"Spaghetti," I repeat.

"Here," he says as he scoops some of the red sauce into a spoon. He blows on it and then offers it to me. "Taste it." His eyes bore into mine and I wonder why he doesn't like looking at my naked form.

I part my lips and accept his gift. I've never tasted anything like it. A low moan of pleasure escapes me as I devour the small taste. "This is extraordinary."

He smirks and gives me a half shrug. "It's even better with the noodles. Can you please wear something?" The strain in his voice has me wanting to look at his cock as he calls it. As if it calls to me, it bulges proudly in his

pants. Since my nakedness seems to bring him physical pain based upon the frown on his face, I reluctantly go dress.

Once I walk back into the kitchen, I settle in the chair and watch him cook. It smells so good and my stomach grumbles loudly. His jaw clenches as he cooks quietly. I close my eyes and think of my sister and of Mama too. There was a time when I was happy. My mother would tell me stories of the city. Places called restaurants and movie theaters and malls. It all sounded so magical. Papa would always get stern with her and tell her she was filling our heads with nonsense.

I wonder if I'm allowed to talk about the nonsense with Atticus. Would he frown like Papa and tell me not to speak of it? Worry niggles at me. As soon as I am well, I will leave his home. Everything here is too unusual and I feel out of place. I don't want to say or do the wrong thing.

I just want to be free.

But you're lonely.

The voice within me mocks me and emotion quivers through me. My lower stomach is aching and I know I'll be menstruating soon. The sadness is always the worst during that week each month. Perhaps I should leave before I start. Tears fall and don't stop for days on end sometimes. I certainly don't want Atticus seeing me that way.

"Here you go, little fox," he murmurs as he sets down the mountain of food in front of me.

I lift my gaze to his and our eyes lock for a moment. My core clenches simply from looking at him.

Because he's so beautiful.

Blinking away that thought, I stare down at the food that steams. I wait for him to sit and eye my plate warily. When I kill rabbits or squirrels, I cook their carcasses over the fire and eat the meat from the bones. And the fruit I just gulp straight from the can. I'm unsure how to eat this...spaghetti.

He picks up a utensil and starts twisting. Then, he shovels in a bite, the red sauce splattering over his whiskers. It makes me smile. He freezes mid-chew and I wonder if I did something wrong. Quickly, I look down at my plate.

"My friend Suma Walkingstick will be by tomorrow to check on you," he says after he swallows his food.

I carefully pick up my utensil and attempt to mimic his actions. The twisting is difficult and if the food wasn't so hot, I'd settle for just picking it

up with my fingers and eating it that way. I manage to get some of the food into my mouth but most of it falls back onto the plate. I let out a frustrated groan.

“Would you like me to cut it up to make it easier to eat?” he asks. Our eyes meet and his green ones sparkle with humor.

My cheeks burn in shame. I remember my brothers ridiculing me and this doesn’t feel much different.

“Fruit,” I snap and let out a huff.

“Whoa,” he says, chuckling. “Calm down. I wasn’t insulting you. I’m just trying to help.” His bare foot nudges mine under the table and it sends currents of excitement zapping through me. Instead of retreating, I rub my cold feet against his warm one.

“I don’t eat food like this.”

He lets out a sigh. “Which is why you’re skinny as fuck. We’re going to fix that, Eve. I’m going to teach you things.”

The utensil falls to the plate with a clatter and I rise to my feet. My hands tremble with worry. “I don’t want to learn,” I rasp out. I cringe at the many lessons my father and brothers taught me.

Slowly, like I do sometimes when I’m sneaking up on an animal I need to kill for food, he rises. Both his palms are out and his brows are furled together.

“I won’t ever hurt you,” he rumbles, the vow thick in his voice.

Somehow, I believe him.

I’ve known him for years and he’s not hurt me once. In fact, he’s only tried to please me with gifts and kindness.

“I can’t stay. I don’t need a husband,” I whisper.

His lips flatten into a firm line and he shakes his head. “Whoever hurt you from before...” he trails off. “I’m not like them.” He tilts his head a little as he scrutinizes me. “I’m like Reed. I just want to keep you safe and well.”

Slowly, I approach him and press my palm to his chest. His heart beats steady and strong inside. It makes me think of nights when I’d curl up with my sister and lay my head on her chest. She’d hum and stroke my hair. Hot tears burn my eyes and I turn on my heel.

I need to leave.

Being here with him, not worrying about constant survival, it gives me too much time to think. The last thing I want to do is think about the past

that hurts.

Rushing over to the door, I manage to fling it open and dart out into the night. I'm not sure how I'll find my home, but I'll try. As soon as my bare feet hit the snow covered landing outside the door, I let out a squeak. Atticus yells my name, but I can't stay.

I long for my boots that I took from my brother when he was killed. I'm not sure where they went or what happened to them. The snow bites into my flesh as I run out into the darkness. Sticks and rocks beneath the snow stab at the bottoms of my feet, but I don't stop. I run through trees, dodging them here and there. The licks of the branches hurt, yet I don't stop.

Eve! Eve! Eve!

My name is called out over and over again.

I'm running and running when I fall into an especially large snow drift near a big tree. My body sinks into the snow that's chest high. The chill works its way down to my bones.

Someone sobs, loud and ragged.

Defeated.

That someone is me.

And then two strong arms are pulling me out and into their warmth.

Atticus.

I cling to his shirt and sob against him. My entire body shudders. Will he whip me like Papa and Ezekiel would when I didn't obey? I cry harder and find it difficult to breathe. I don't want Atticus to hurt me.

"Shh, little fox," he rumbles as he moves swiftly back to the home. "You can't run away like that. I was only trying to feed you, not insult you. Promise me you won't do that again. It's not safe."

I nod even though I'm not sure I can promise it. Anything to hear more of his soothing words. He's not angry. He seems sad.

"I'm c-c-cold," I chatter out.

"That's what happens when you run your near naked ass out into the snow." He chuckles and it has me relaxing considerably.

Once inside, he closes the door behind him. He carries me through the home back into his room. The heat feels good, but I already know what will feel better.

"Shower," I croak.

He shakes his head as he sets me to my feet. "In a little bit. You need to warm up first."

“The shower is warm,” I argue. For such a smart man, he’s not acting that way at the moment.

“Fine,” he grunts.

“Fine,” I mimic.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

atticus

I can't tell her no.

When I try, she frowns and her swollen bottom lip pokes out. It fucks with my head because I want that lip. I'm not supposed to, but I do. I want a lot of things I'm not supposed to.

Walking past her, I head into the bathroom and start the water. By the time I turn around, she's naked, blue, and shivering in the doorway. My cock reacts. Again.

"I'll be in the kitchen," I say gruffly as I start to move past her.

She doesn't step out of the way and instead presses a palm to my chest. "Shower. You and me." Her wide brown eyes blink at me and her brows furl together.

"I can't." Because a man only has so much self-control and she's testing mine.

Her head bows as the rejection of my words stings her. My first instinct is to comfort her. I wrap my arms around her frigid body and hug her to me. She relaxes against my chest. I can't help but run my fingers through her soft hair.

"Just...just wash your hair like I showed you. I'll reheat our food."

I grip her shoulders and peel her from my body. She's still trembling from the cold and her teeth clack together. Poor Eve. Such a fucking mess. I scrub my palm through my short beard and shake away images of my assisting her in the shower.

She allows me to turn her and gently guide her into the shower. Like a fucking perv, my eyes skim down the bones in her spine and land on the two dimples above her ass. I quickly look away.

“Holler if you need anything,” I say in a gruff tone.

Once I hear her moaning under the hot spray, I bolt out of the bathroom. I find a pair of my thickest socks, some sweats, and a hoodie. Maybe if she layers up in all this stuff, she’ll warm up.

I head back to the kitchen and am just starting a pot of coffee when the house phone rings. As soon as I see who’s calling, I smile.

Mom.

“Hey—”

“You were gone weeks, mister. Weeks! And I find out from Suma that you’re back home! You didn’t even call your own mother—”

“Ma, it’s fine. Just been busy. I was going to come into town in the morning to see you. Scout’s honor.”

“Oh, don’t you Scout’s honor me, kiddo. I can tell when you’re lying, remember?”

I let out a heavy sigh as I watch the coffee brew. “A friend of mine was hurt. Fuckin’ bear.”

“Lord,” she breathes. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, my friend is fine,” I say, delicately dancing around the fact he’s a she. If Mom knew I had a female friend, she’d sniff that one out until she made me crazy. “Suma patched things up as per usual.”

“Do I need to stop by and bring some soup?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I’ll come into town for supplies and stop by.”

“When your friend heals, I want you both home for dinner. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Then, because I’m an idiot, I ask a question that usually leads to a lot of probing ones. “You seen Cassandra around?”

The line goes silent and I frown.

“Ma? Did we get disconnected?”

“Um, yes. I’ve seen her around. Still works at her daddy’s bait shop.”

I let out a sigh of relief. Cassandra is my fuck buddy. She’s great in the sack and doesn’t put up too much of a fight when I fall off the grid to do my own shit. It’s like she’s always waiting around for me. Hell, maybe I’m supposed to settle with a girl like Cass. It wouldn’t be the worst thing.

“How’s Judith?”

“Oh, she’s Judith,” Mom replies with a sigh.

“What now?”

“Dating some guy who’s bad news. Your father wanted to throttle him at dinner the other night. She has some bruises on her arms. I asked her about them and she got angry. I don’t know what’s going on with her.”

Typical Judith.

My sweet sister wasn’t the same after her near death experience.

Another added layer of guilt on my conscience.

“I’ll talk to her,” I vow. “When I come to town, I’ll visit with her and get to the bottom of it.”

“You’re a godsend. See you soon, sweetheart.”

We hang up and I worry about Judith. Coffee and spaghetti don’t exactly go together, but I’m too spaced out to figure something else out. My sister weighs heavily on my mind.

A prickle of awareness making my hairs stand on end has me swiveling around. Eve looks every bit of thirteen in my massive clothes. But she looks warm and that’s what truly matters.

“These are too big,” she says, pulling the sweats away from her body.

I step over to her and show her the inside where the drawstrings are at. Pulling as tight as I can make them, I tie the strings in a bow and then fold the top down to make them fit even more snug. When our eyes meet, hers seem darker than usual. Hardened. Angry.

“Did you have any trouble washing your hair?”

“I don’t do it like you do,” she says with a pout that makes me smile.

“I’ve had years of practice.”

“I cleaned my teeth again.” She bares her teeth like a mountain lion.

“Beautiful.” As soon as I say the word, her bluish tinted cheeks flood with crimson.

Quickly, I tear my gaze from her and clear my throat. As though she were a child—I mean technically she is—I cut her spaghetti into small pieces so she doesn’t have to twirl it around her fork. She seems pleased by this and wastes no time scarfing it down. I’m not even hungry, but I force food down so I have an excuse not to talk.

Everything I say comes out twisted.

All my thoughts are no better.

“Tomorrow, I’m going into town. Do you want anything?”

“Fruit,” she chirps.

A smile tugs at my lips. “That’s a given, Eve. What about chocolate? Cookies? Books?”

“Knife.”

Right. This isn’t some high school chick. No, this is Eve. Feral, wild Eve.

“Right, a knife. I’ll find some better fitting clothes for you as well.”

She nods, seemingly pleased by this as she holds her coffee mug. Her eyes close as she inhales the scent wafting from the steaming cup and then gingerly takes a sip.

“I love coffee,” she whispers.

“As much as you like fruit?”

She glowers at me.

“Point taken,” I joke. “I know you love canned peaches, but have you had a fresh one before.”

Her head cocks to the side.

Desperate for something to talk about so I don’t stare at her plump lips, I start blabbering. “Yeah, peaches. They grow in orchards. They’re an orange color and have a slight fuzz on the skin. You can eat it. Most people eat fresh peaches like they would an apple. My ma loves to put it in peach cobbler—”

“Ma?” Her eyes water.

Fuck.

“Do you miss your mother?” I ask, my voice soft.

Her lips press together. “I ache for my sister.”

It makes me think of Judith. Finding her cold, broken body inside that crevasse. Feeling the weight of responsibility crushing down on me like an avalanche. I reach across the table and gently pat Eve’s hand. “I can’t imagine losing a sister.”

She jerks her hand back. “My brothers...” Violence gleams in her brown eyes. “They hurt her.”

Pain lances through my chest. “A brother is supposed to look after his sister. It’s his duty to protect her. I would do anything for my sister Judith.”

A hot tear races down her cheek and drips from her jaw. “Is she your wife?”

Disgust roils through me. “Fuck no,” I growl. “She’s my sister.”

“My father was my husband,” she says, her voice growing cold. “My brothers wanted to be.”

Jesus.

What is it about these woods and fucking incest?

This is a conversation Reed should be handling, not me.

"Whatever they did to you was wrong," I bite out. "Understand? Relatives don't..." They don't fuck or marry or whatever the hell was going on in those woods. "It's just wrong."

Her features lose some of their hardness as she regards me. "Wrong."

"Yes, wrong." Then I sigh. "Plus, you're too young for all that."

"All what?"

I rub at the back of my neck, trying to find the right words. "Bedroom stuff."

Her brows furl. "Sleeping?"

"Together."

"Like us?"

Fuck.

"We sleep in the same bed because I only have one and you've been injured. You need me to look after you." I shove the wet dream out of my mind.

"Papa kept me in his bed but..."

Goddamn, I don't want to hear this. "He hurt you."

She winces. "Teaching me."

"That's not education, Eve, that's abuse."

"Abuse?"

"When someone uses their power above you to make you feel powerless. To punish and torture you. What your father and brothers did is abuse. Sexual. Mental. Physical."

"You don't abuse me," she whispers. "We just sleep together."

God help me.

"We sleep in the same bed."

"Together."

I give up on this one. "Yeah, Eve. We sleep together."

She starts to scratch on her chest and it reminds me we need to apply more healing paste. I stand and motion for her to follow me to the bedroom. When I start for the paste, she lets out a heavy sigh.

"I don't like that."

"And I don't like seeing you hurt. The paste helps." I motion at her. "Lift your shirt."

She pulls off the hoodie and I'm once again forced to stare at her chest. Her breasts, now clean, seem so soft and delicate against the harsh cuts on

her chest. Thankfully, everything seems to be healing well.

“I think you can apply the paste now,” I tell her, looking toward the window.

“I don’t want to.”

I shoot my eyes to hers and defiance shines in them. With an annoyed growl, I scoop up some of the paste and kneel in front of her. Her small hands go to my shoulders as I softly apply the paste to her tender skin. I can’t help but glance at her small, peaked nipples. It makes me some kind of twisted to want to lick them. My dick’s twisted too because I’m hard as fuck right now.

I need to get the hell out of this house.

Cass can suck my dick and make me forget all about these fucked up fantasies with Eve.

It’s not fucking right.

Eve’s just some feral kid.

And I’m not the man who’s going to tame her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

eve

I wake up drenched in sweat and pains cramping through my abdomen. In the dark, I can't make out my surroundings, but I smell *him*. Atticus. Not my father or my brothers, who always stank of their own putrid odors. Atticus smells fresh like pine and snow. His heavy arm is slung over me and he snores quietly. I take the moment to explore him while it's safe. My fingers dance along his hairy arm and slide along the strong curve of his shoulder. When I reach his hair, I run the silky strands through my fingers before bringing it to my nose to inhale.

His manhood—er cock—is pressed against my hip. It's strange that he doesn't ever put it inside me. I'd learned from an early age that when a man's body grows hard, he needs to be inside a woman to make it go away. But Atticus never needs me to make it go away. It just does after a while. In his sleep, he rocks gently against me. I'm not terrified of him like I was with my family or even Reed. He's the big bear from my imagination. The one who always looks after me. I'm fascinated by the way his breath hitches each time he ruts against me. How I can feel every curve and ridge on his cock through our garments. The more he rocks, the hotter I feel.

Warmth licks and lashes at me like when I'm standing over a fire. It burns from the inside out, though. Between my thighs, I throb with a craving I don't understand. My breasts feel heavy and achy—my nipples hard with this same need. To be touched. The throbbing pulsates until the need to rub at it and make it stop overwhelms me. It's an almost painful need. Like when I'm starving and my stomach growls desperately.

My heart races and then stops altogether when he moves in his sleep. His massive hand cups my breast over my shirt. When his thumb brushes

my nipple, a thrill of exhilaration burns through me to my unfilled womb. The throbbing is driving me mad. Without considering my actions, I grab his wrist and pull it there. To the aching place. His fingers—of their own accord—rub at me there.

A moan escapes me.

It feels good.

Unlike anything I've ever experienced before.

Confusing but wonderful.

He's still sleeping, but his breathing is shallow. Like he might wake at any moment. He mutters a name—Cassandra—and an unusual feeling churns inside me.

"Eve," I croak.

All anger bleeds away when his hand slips beneath the pants. Flesh on flesh. His touch could create fire. It's brilliant and beautiful. I spread my thighs, desperate for more. Rather than filling the ache within me, he simply touches a spot between my lower lips, buried in the hair there, and rubs it with expert knowledge. The sound that escapes me is one I've heard Devon make on many occasions.

Feral. Hungry. Eager.

His finger slides down, slipping in wetness that's leaking from me, and then he's back to rubbing that same spot. I lie there, helpless to the unfamiliar pleasure, as he introduces me into a world I've never been.

Glittering stars.

Bright lights.

Cries of need.

My body detonates. Every single hair on my body stands on end. A buzzing zings through every muscle, vein, and bone. And when it ends, I feel satiated and warm and tired.

"Oh fuck."

I stiffen at his gruff words.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

He jerks his hand from my pants and rolls away from me. I hear something heavy hit the floor on the other side of the bed. Then, bright light floods the room. I squint against the harsh lights to find Atticus standing beside the bed, half asleep and...terrified.

I look all around, searching for the threat. His home is safe, but could a bear get inside? A mountain lion? When I look back at him, he's gaping

down at his hand. His fingers are covered in blood. My blood. It's then I realize I've begun menstruating.

"I hurt you," he chokes out, his face crumpling. "Oh, fuck, Eve. I'm so sorry."

Hurt me? He made me feel amazing.

"It's my blood," I whisper, "but you didn't hurt me."

His wild green eyes meet mine as he wiggles his fingers. "Then what do you call this?"

"My blood."

"Because I hurt—"

"Menstruation. It means my body is ready to bear children," I admit with a frown.

His gaze hardens, making me wince. "I can't sleep in here with you anymore. It's too..."

Too what?

Warm?

I like warmth.

"You're a temptation I don't need and didn't realize I wasn't strong enough to ignore." He growls and storms into the bathroom. I hear the sink turn on as he washes his hand.

Papa spoke of temptation in the Bible. Is that what I am? Cursed? Hot blood trickles from within me, leaking into my pants. Maybe I am cursed. I'm named after Eve, who wasn't exactly God's favorite.

With a sigh, I climb out of bed and rid myself of the soiled pants. If I were in my shack, I'd roll up some old, tattered strips of cloth and use them to soak up the blood. I'm not sure what to use here. Blood runs down the inside of my thigh, dripping onto the floor below. I stare down at it, pondering what to do next.

"I, uh, I don't have female products," he says with a cough, exiting the bathroom holding a small cloth. "Maybe clean up with this and I'll see about finding you some way of dealing with that."

That being the river of blood running down my leg.

He tosses the cloth at me and it hits the floor. When I make no moves to grab it, he strides over to me and kneels down. Then, he gently grabs my thigh and runs the hot cloth along my flesh.

"Damn," he grumbles. "It's really coming down. Is this natural? Does it always do this?" He looks up at me in panic. "My mom and sister used

tampons, but like, I never saw how they put them in or anything.”

I blink down at him. “Sometimes it’s so heavy it attracts predators.”

His eyes widen in horror. “Predators.”

“They smell the blood. I use clothes to soak it up, but they still smell it.”

“Jesus...fuck...Eve...”

He lets out a strangled sound and then quickly cleans up my mess. I’m pleasantly surprised when he cleanses my lower lips, though it doesn’t bring me the same pleasure as before. Just a warm feeling inside my chest. That he’s looking after me, but not trying to hurt me.

He hands me the cloth before walking over to his drawers. I admire his strong body as he roots around for whatever it is he’s looking for. Eventually, he pulls out his black underwear.

“These are still too big for you, but we could roll up a towel and put it inside. Might soak the blood up while you sleep. I’ll add tampons or pads or whatever to my run to town in the morning.”

Once I’m cleaned up, dressed in his underwear and the towel is secured, I lie back down on another towel. I wait for him to join me, but his jaw clenches furiously.

“Eve...”

“Sleep,” I bite out, patting the bed beside me.

“No. I’m sleeping in my chair from now on.”

I glare at him. “You’re warm.”

“My house is warm enough that you don’t need me.” His green eyes flare with challenge. “You can sleep alone. Been doing it for years now, little fox.”

A strange feeling tugs inside my chest. Sometimes, when I’m menstruating, I feel sad and lonely. So achy and desperate that death feels preferable. Hot tears well in my eyes. I also tend to cry more easily.

“I’m not mad at you,” he chokes out, his brows furling together. “I’m mad at me. I...I touched you.”

I don’t understand his anger at himself.

“It felt good.”

His nostrils flare. “That’s beside the point. It can’t ever happen again.”

“What if I want it again?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. “I’m sorry for what I did in my sleep. I didn’t do it on purpose. But clearly, sleeping together is a bad idea. Please forgive me.”

With those words, he slams the light off and stalks out of the room. I draw the covers up that smell like him and silently sob. I find one thing in my life that isn't about pain, survival, and terrible memories, but I can't even have it. Just a tease of something wonderful. A tiny taste of what Reed and Devon have.

I think about the way Reed cherishes Devon. Simple looks they share. The way he claims her with kisses she seems to love. How his touches are gentle but possessive. Nothing he does to her is even remotely like the way my father and brothers treated me. They both enjoy each other. I've silently watched them from the trees for years, so I know it's not something they only do in the presence of others. It's real. With Atticus, hope had started to grow inside me. That maybe I could have something like that.

He doesn't want me that way, though.

Atticus was clearly thinking about Cassandra while he touched me.

Is Cassandra beautiful like Devon? I thought my sister was beautiful, but Devon is like how I imagine the angels in the Bible to look like. Golden hair. Sweet smile. Ethereal.

How will a little fox claim a big bear if he has eyes for an angel?

Bitterness churns in my stomach.

A little fox has no place with a bear.

Foxes were meant for the forests. Running far, far away from others. Foxes do better alone. Alone hurts, though. It really hurts.

Another sob escapes me.

I cry all night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

atticus

I'm such an asshole.

Worse than an asshole.

I'm a child predator like her father and her brothers. Fuck. This morning, I made her some oatmeal, turned on the television, and left her with the instructions to not leave. Then, like the coward I am, I bolted.

I need space.

Shame coats me like a drenching rain. I touched her. Made her orgasm. When I saw the blood, I nearly lost my shit. At first, I thought I'd hurt her. It sickened me. But then...

My dick hardens in my jeans, making me hate myself a little more.

Space.

Lots of fucking space.

I need to get her healed and sent back to the wild where she fucking belongs.

As though on autopilot, I drive into town, headed straight for the bait shop. Everything else can wait. I need to get laid and I need it now. Then, I can think clearly and stop looking at Eve like *that*. When I see Cass's white Chevy pickup in the front lot on Main Street, I park beside her and let out a relieved sigh. It'll be like old times. We can run upstairs, make it quick, and I can be on my way.

Hell, maybe I'll ask her out for dinner or something.

Cassandra is a good girl. I've known her since high school. She married right out of high school, but ended up divorced after their son was born. He's in high school now, but Cass still never settled.

I shut the truck off and fling open the door. Snow pelts my face, but I'm burning with the need to expel this sexual energy. I shut the truck door and trot into the bait shop. As soon as I walk in, the scent of familiarity hits me. It's a quaint shop filled with fishing gear and one I've shopped at often. This morning I'm shopping for a curvy brunette with a sweet laugh.

The moment I hear her laughter as she speaks to someone on the phone, my body relaxes. Yes. I need this. Desperately. Cass's dark hair hangs long down her back and she twirls the phone cord around her finger as she listens to the person speaking on the other line. Her dad's bait shop is the same as it was when I was a kid. Old but has a little bit of everything. I busy myself looking at the knives under a glass case at the register while I wait for Cass to end her call.

"Love you too," she says, "but someone just walked in. Okay, bye."

She hangs up and swivels around, a polite smile fixed on her pretty face. As soon as she sees me, it falls. "Atticus."

"Hey, Cass," I greet. "Long time, no see."

"Been about a year," she says, her voice tight.

"How've you been? Come out from behind the register and give me a hug."

Her lips purse together. "A lot can happen in a year."

I'm frowning as she walks around the corner. Her hand rests on her barely protruding stomach, an engagement ring glittering on her finger.

Oh fuck.

"You're pregnant?" I croak, shocked as hell.

"Frank and I are getting married."

Frank? One of our mutual friends? Last I heard, he left for California. Never knew he came back.

"Frank Jefferson?"

"Yes," she says. "He manages the bank now."

"Oh." I sound like a fucking idiot. "I, uh..."

"You have to find a new fuck buddy," she says, no warmth in her tone. "He put a ring on this one."

I wince at her harsh tone. Jesus. Was I really that much of a dick? I mean...I was coming here to fuck and run. Like always.

"God, Cass, I'm sorry."

"Most people say congratulations."

“No,” I rush out. “Congrats on your life. I’m sorry I was such a dick to you. You didn’t deserve that.”

Her brows crash together. “You couldn’t be tamed. Deep down, I knew that. You’re meant to be out there.” She waves her hand toward the window that overlooks the woods. “Free. Wild. Wherever it is Atticus Knox disappears to for months or even years at a time.”

“I like to camp,” I say lamely.

She snorts. “You like to be off the grid. It’s fine. I prefer life in town and my fiancé spends every waking minute with me. Life is good for me.”

I rub at my neck and sigh. “I’m glad to hear it. I’ll, uh, get out of here then.”

“Best you do. Frank won’t be happy you came in.”

“I meant no harm,” I tell her. “Tell him I came in to buy something.”

“Are you? Buying something?”

I see a small knife meant for a child. “Yeah. I want that knife right there.”

“That one’s sixty dollars. If you’re buying one for a kid, there are some over here that are nineteen.”

Eve, despite her age and her size, is no child. She’s...something else. And a cheap knife won’t do.

“I’ll take the expensive one.”

“Suit yourself.”



I stare up at my parents’ mammoth house nestled in the side of the mountain. Growing up, I loved our house. It was cozy and warm and I lived with two adoring parents. But I always felt freer outside of it. So many times I’d get my ass whipped for staying out past dark, playing in the woods. Dad would have to come find me every time.

Now, as the snow drifts heavily around me, I consider bypassing the house and walking into the woods. Just walking and walking away from all the shit that’s brewing in my life. Never turn back. The idea is nice, but then

it circles back to Eve. She's waiting for me to return to her. To bring her food and supplies. To take her back home eventually.

"I'm getting too old to chase you," Dad calls out from the porch, startling me.

I shake my head and make my way through the snow to the porch. "Hey, Dad."

He stands from his rocking chair and pulls me to him for a bear hug. Dad is the one where the term "bear hug" came from. Tall, broad shoulders, gruff. Dad is bigger than any linebacker I ever encountered in the NFL. Bigger than me and my brothers.

"Good seeing you, kid," he says. "Your mother has been sick with worry. You know how she is."

I chuckle. I certainly do. Mom is the opposite of Dad. Tiny and energetic and talkative. She buzzes around like a bee on a hot summer day. They've always been an unusual match to me, but they've been married forever, so they clearly find a way to make it work.

"How's everyone been doing?" I ask, leaning against the wood column on the porch. "Judith?"

Dad's face darkens. "Judith is Judith."

"She here?"

He looks at his watch. "It's not noon yet, so she's probably laid up in bed with a hangover."

"I'll talk to her."

He nods. "But talk to your mother first or we're getting our asses handed to us for lunch rather than the fried chicken she's planning. Don't ruin my lunch, boy."

"Yeah, yeah," I grumble before heading inside. I shed my outerwear and lose my boots at the door so as not to track mud on the carpet. The house smells good. Mom's cooking is one I miss on the daily.

I find her standing over the sink washing her hands. She's barely five feet, but her attitude is fucking huge.

"Ma."

She whips around, grinning. "My baby boy!"

I laugh as she launches herself at me, squeezing the life out of me. She must have learned the whole bear hug thing from Dad. I hug her back and bend to inhale her familiar perfume I've always been comforted by.

This squeezing in my chest is why I've felt torn between two worlds.

My family means everything to me. But nature calls to me. It's why, even though I enjoyed playing football, I hated living out there. Beyond the safety of our small Alaskan town nestled in the snowy mountains and hidden in the trees. Playing ball for the Broncos was every man's dream. And for a while, I thought I wanted that dream. I injured my shoulder, though, two years in and the relief of coming back home was overwhelming.

"Smells good."

"Fried chicken. I knew you'd be around and it's your favorite. How's your friend? I tried to pry more information from Suma, but you know how that woman is. She just smiles. Doesn't answer a dang question. It's rather odd—"

"Ma. Chill," I say with a chuckle. "Everything's fine."

"Then you should have brought him by."

I groan, knowing I need to let her in on some of the truth. Mostly, because I need female guidance. "Uh, actually, my friend is a woman." Over exaggeration on the woman part.

She pulls away, her mouth agape. Her blond, curly hair has been pulled into a bun that resembles mine. Her green eyes glitter with shock. "Woman? You have a female friend?"

"Oh God," I grumble. "Don't start."

"Don't start? I most certainly will. I didn't start and you let sweet Cass slip away—"

"Thanks for the warning, by the way."

"And all I ever want is for my boy to settle down and have a nice family so he—"

"I'm gonna go check on Judith," I bark out and rush from the kitchen despite her chatter following after me.

I bound up the stairs and head down the hallway until I find Judith's room. Where Will and Vic moved out when they turned eighteen, Judith has never officially left home. It's like she never matured enough. Nothing is wrong with her mentally, but something keeps her from leaving the nest. I hate that I'm responsible for the girl she is today.

"Knock, knock," I utter, rapping on her door.

"Go away unless you have coffee."

"I'm not Mom or Dad, so that should at least grant me entry."

"Atticus!"

The door gets flung open and my sister flings herself into my arms. She's tiny like Mom, but has darker hair like Dad. Judith is every bit as small as Eve is.

"You have to hide me in here," I whisper conspiratorially. "Ma found out I have a girl who happens to be a friend and she's probably already started a Pinterest board for our wedding. Help. Please, sis."

She giggles and pulls me into her room. We flop onto her bed, both wearing matching smiles. Judith sits up on her side, regarding me with an impish expression.

"Spill. I may not be Mom, but I still want the juicy gossip."

I roll my eyes. "I'll spill mine if you tell me why you're being a brat to our parents."

"I'm not being a brat. They just think they can control me."

We grow quiet. I don't need to remind her it's because she still lives under their roof. She knows.

"They love you," I say instead.

"So does Joey."

I try to quell the irritation swelling up inside me. The protective big brother feelings will never be squashed no matter how old she gets. My sister may only be ten years my junior, but she's still just a kid in my mind.

"Joey sounds like an asshole," I grumble.

"He kind of is." She giggles. "Actually, not kind of. Joey is a *total* dick."

I pick up her wrist and inspect it for the bruises Mom mentioned. Sure enough, there are plenty of them. "A dick who puts his hands on you?"

"Not like that," she hisses, snatching her hand back. "It was all sexual shit, if you must know. He's a dick because once he gets laid, he doesn't need me anymore. Goes back to his stupid trailer and doesn't call again until he wants to fuck."

I wince at her harsh delivery because it's not unlike what I did with Cassandra. Men are such fucking assholes.

"Does Will know what a cunt this guy is?" I ask, feeling the urge to round up Will and Vic to beat some twerp's ass for hurting our sister. Like old times' sake.

"Oh, Will is very familiar with Joey. He's arrested him before. They don't like each other." Her nostrils flare. "But Joey is my decision. Not Will's."

“You deserve someone who will spend time with you, though,” I tell her.

“Maybe. Now tell me about her,” she says in a terse tone, changing the subject. “Your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Oh, God. Another Cass?”

“No,” I bite out. “Eve’s...different.”

She turns her wide eyes on me. “Different how?”

A fucking teenager for one.

“She comes from out there.”

“Ohhhh...”

In this town, we’re all far too familiar with the people who escape town life to live off the grid. We often run into them when they come to town for supplies or if we happen upon them while hunting or fishing or camping. They’re all so feral.

“How did you befriend this wild one?”

“It’s a long story,” I say with a sigh. “I found her through a friend. She was all alone out there. Her family was killed. Recently, she was attacked by a bear. Fucked her up pretty bad. She needed medical attention. Suma came and helped me with her. Now she’s just healing at my place.”

“Is she hot?” She waggles her eyebrows.

“You’re annoying.”

“Am not.”

“Lies.”

She snorts. “Are you taking her back when she’s better?”

“That’s the plan.”

“But you like her,” she says, her green eyes gleaming with wickedness. “I can tell.”

I grind my teeth. “Not like that.”

“Why not? Did she lose all her teeth already? Stinky puss—”

With a growl, I cover my sister’s mouth with my hand so she doesn’t finish that question. “She’s like fifteen or sixteen. Fuck if I know.”

Her eyes widen and she stops squirming, so I remove my hand.

“Holy shit,” she breathes. “My angelic brother has decided to break the law and fuck a teenager. Wait until Will gets a whiff of this.”

“Stop.” The last thing I need is my brother on my ass about this.

“I didn’t say you actually did it. Just that you decided it.”

“I didn’t decide shit.”

“Which means you’re still thinking about it—”

“Judith.”

“Just sayin’, Atticus.”

“Well, stop. Just let it go.” I sigh heavily. “I need your help. Can we keep this discreet?”

Planning a secret mission behind our parents’ back is exactly the type of thing Judith lives for.

“You betcha, bro. What do you need?”

“Panties. Tampons.”

“You so nasty.”

“Judith—”

“Right. I’m kidding. I’ll get you the goods, but you must promise on Ma’s Bible that you’ll let me know the moment you fuck her.”

“Jesus,” I groan. “What makes you think that’s going to happen?”

“Your stupid lovesick puppy eyes. You’re totally gonna fuck her and when you do, I want details.”

“I’ll write you a letter from prison.”

“Cool! If you see any hot guys while there—”

I shut my annoying sister up by tickling her until she cries.

CHAPTER EIGHT

eve

I stare at the black thing Atticus used to make the pictures change on his box. The television is what he calls it. I had vague memories of my mother describing such things to me, but until my stay here, I'd never seen them.

It's loud.

Chaotic.

Unnerving.

I wish I knew how to turn it off.

Ignoring the loud talking, I make my way into the kitchen. Atticus didn't feed me anything but a little bowl of oatmeal before he left and now my stomach is growling. I find a couple cans of peaches, but without my knife, I can't figure out how to open them. His knives in the drawer all are too dull. In the past, the cans he brought me had a unique piece on top that you could lift and pull, but the ones in his cabinet are flat with no tab. I open the white box he calls "the fridge" and marvel over the chill coming from it. I could have really used one of these things last summer when I killed a deer. All that meat was wasted because I couldn't eat it fast enough before it spoiled.

The fridge is filled with little bottles of liquids. One is red, but I can't make sense of the words. At one time, my mother attempted teaching me to read. I wasn't interested and she eventually gave up. I wish I'd learned.

I pull out the bottle and pull off the cap. It smells sweet with a little tang. Opening my mouth, I hold it up and let it ooze onto my tongue.

Yum.

I pour until my mouth is filled and then gulp it down. It's the best thing I've ever tasted. I squeeze and squeeze until I've emptied the container that

didn't have much in it to begin with. Once it's gone, I pout, but then abandon that bottle for another one. This one is in a yellow bottle. With a huge squirt, I eagerly taste the yellow sauce.

Yuck!

I spit it out and use my shirt to swipe at my tongue. This is vile. I toss it in the bin I've seen Atticus use to get rid of the things he doesn't want anymore. Rooting around in the fridge some more, I locate a jar filled with something green sloshing around in juice. I unscrew the lid and fish one out of the cold water.

Tangy and bitter.

But also very yummy.

I crunch on the little green things until I empty the container. Then, I gulp down the juice. Strange but tasty. The jar seems useful, so I set it on the counter to keep. I'm sure Atticus won't mind. At the very back of the fridge, I find something in a tiny brown cup. It takes some effort, but I peel off the top to discover something sweet smelling.

I lick out the jiggly substance and moan in pleasure.

Now this is the best thing I've ever tasted.

Scooping out the brown stuff with two fingers, I suck down every last drop of it and even lick the cup. I'm still hungry, though. When I menstruate, it's like I can't get enough to eat.

When will he come back?

Will he come back?

He promised, but he seemed so eager to get away. Sadness prickles at my eyes, but I ignore it. I'll hunt some real food. I don't need him to bring his sharp knife and open my fruit. Fruit is nice, but what I need is rabbit or squirrel or something to not make me feel so dizzy.

After layering up with clothing that smells like Atticus, I steal some of his boots that are way too big, and then grab one of the useless knives from the kitchen drawer. Once I open the door, the icy wind hits me, making me want to retreat inside.

A few days here and I'm already afraid to go into the elements.

I need to get over that weakness right now.

Slowly, I walk out into the snowy wind and squint against the harshness of it. Finding game will be tricky, but it's not the first time I've had to hunt during a storm. I creep into the trees, careful not to fall into a deep snow drift. My ears perk, listening for animal sounds.

Cracking.

Something's running.

I hold my knife and press myself against a tree, keeping my eyes peeled. Snarling. Wolves? My heart rate quickens. Wolves don't make for tasty meat and I don't think I'm hungry enough for that. I'd rather eat the yellow sauce out of the bin. Problem with wolves is, they'll eat you before you eat them. I make myself as small as I can against the tree as I wait it out.

A light brown rabbit darts through the snow toward me, so focused on outrunning the wolf it doesn't see me. With my lightning fast reflexes, I swing my knife down, making contact with the back of the rabbit. It lets out a strangled cry as blood bursts from it. I lose my knife in the process, but it rolls to a stop near a tree. Without hesitation, I pounce on it and bring it to my chest, pulling out the knife just as I hear the growl behind me.

Slowly, I turn to face my attacker.

A bear?

No, it's a dog. From time to time I see dogs in the woods. Once, several years ago, we had a dog, but then it turned out to be Reed and Devon's dog. This one is about that size but has fluffy, matted dark brown fur.

And no eyes.

It has huge, scarred claw marks down its face, no doubt having lost its eyes to a bear attack. My chest tightens and my eyes water.

"Blind bear," I murmur. "You hungry?"

It sniffs the air and whines.

Not so ferocious after all.

"Come here," I say, patting my thigh.

He gingerly trots through the snow toward me. I hold my hand out so he can sniff it. Once he deems me safe, he licks my palm and wags his tail.

"Let's get you some rabbit."



Blind Bear—the name I've taken to calling him—chews on one of the bones from the rabbit as we sit by the fire I started. It's cold out here, but

sitting on a piece of wood with the heat flickering and chasing away the snowflakes as we eat our rabbit, it's not so bad. Feels more like home. And while the rabbit fills my belly as it should, I still crave more oatmeal or that brown jiggly sauce that was so good.

And Atticus.

I don't understand him.

I don't understand how I feel toward him.

With my sister, I loved her. She was my everything. I needed her by me always. Esther was everything good in my horrible world. When she died, I lost a piece of me—a piece I didn't realize was missing until recently.

Sure, Atticus came to visit and brought me gifts. And, despite my not wanting it to, I liked the way my heart would tighten in my chest whenever he'd show up. Something about Atticus has always felt warm and safe. I like Reed and Devon, but even they do not evoke this sensation Atticus does.

He's gone, though.

Left for supplies, so he says.

I'm still not sure if he's coming back.

He has to come back. I need things like a knife and something warmer to wear. I need him to take me back to my home because this new place is far from what I'm familiar with and it makes me uneasy.

Blind Bear whines and crawls closer to me. I hold out my hand for him. He scoots until he's close and then licks it. I scrub behind his ears with my nails, which he seems to like.

"How'd you lose your eyes?" I ask. "Big bear get you too?"

He barks.

I'll take that as a yes.

"Are you cold?"

Another bark.

I hate to admit it, but I am too. The idea of taking a hot shower is almost maddening. I'm irritated that Atticus has shown me something I thoroughly enjoy and will miss greatly once I go back home. I would've been better never being introduced to it.

I may not be able to take showers, but I will brush my teeth. The cool sensation in my mouth is something I'll never grow tired of. Not to mention, he says it keeps my teeth from falling out. All of my family lost

their teeth except Esther and me. It made my brothers and father seem more frightening—not that they needed any help with that.

“Come, Blind Bear. Time to warm up.”

He barks in agreement. I kick out the fire with snow and then walk back to the cabin. Once inside, I shed my wet clothing. Blind Bear wags his tail as he sniffs around, checking things out. He flops down on the floor in the bedroom, panting.

I strip off the rest of my clothes, frowning when I find the towel soaked with blood. I drop it in the pile of clothes before turning on the water. As soon as the hot water steams up the bathroom, I climb inside under the spray.

If heaven was a feeling, it'd be this. I just know it. I could take ten showers a day for the rest of my life and be thrilled. For the longest time, I just stand under the hot spray, letting it run down my body. I don't wash. Simply relax. Blood runs down my thigh and clouds the water at my feet. I'm reminded of how Atticus massaged me. Reaching down, I find the spot he touched. It throbs slightly beneath the pad of my finger. I never knew such a place existed on my body. A small place that if you rub it just right, it feels really good.

I press my finger down, applying more pressure, and rub circles. It makes my muscles tighten and small whimpers escape me. The urge to go faster is overwhelming. Over and over I move my finger until the pleasure explodes through me. I nearly lose my balance as I cry out. My heart races wildly in my chest. Whatever that is, I love it. I want them all the time, but they're exhausting to find.

The water eventually turns cold, so I shut off the levers. After drying off, I choose more of Atticus's clothes. I have to roll up another cloth to put into his underwear, but once I'm all put back together, I feel relaxed and almost happy.

Almost.

I'd be happy if he'd just come back.

“Blind Bear, let's go watch the noisy box. The people on there have shiny teeth and sometimes they talk about this thing called pizza that makes my stomach grumble. You will love it.”

He barks in agreement.

Good boy.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

atticus

It's dark by the time I pull up to my cabin. I feel like a dick about that too. She's probably scared out of her mind. And I don't know that she would even remember how to make more oatmeal or coffee.

Fuck.

She's probably starving.

Guilt consumes me and I grab one of the bags in the cab before hopping out of the truck. The scent of fire makes my nostrils flare. I find remains of a recent fire near the cabin along with a bloody pile of bones.

Goddammit.

She was starving.

I swallow down the self-loathing. While I was out there trying to get my dick sucked and then having a nice lunch with my family, she was here hunting down food in her weakened state. I'm a monster.

The moment I push open the door, I hear growling. I pause. "Eve?"

Silence.

Did an animal get in? Is she hurt?

The door swings open fully, giving me a good view of what I'm up against. *Friends* on television. Eve curled up under a blanket on the recliner. And a goddamn mangy dog at her feet growling at me.

"Eve!"

She jolts upright and turns toward me. Her eyes are wild until she sees me and then relief flashes in them. More guilt floods through me. I close the door behind me and point at the dog.

"What is that?"

"A dog."

“I know that. But why is it in my house?”

“He was cold.”

Only Eve could find some mangy Chow-Chow with no fucking eyes, befriend it, and move it into my house.

“Dog,” I say lightly. “I live here.”

His growling continues.

“Blind Bear, that’s Atticus. It’s okay.” She scratches at his ears and his tail starts thumping.

I kneel. “Blind Bear, huh? Seems fitting. Come here, boy.”

He sniffs his way over to me and when he deems me safe—probably when he can smell the lingering scent of fried chicken on my hands—he licks me.

“Good boy,” I croon. I lift my gaze to Eve. “A dog, huh?”

She nods sharply. “I’m taking him with me when I go home.”

Home.

The thought of sending her away, even though I was ready to moments ago in my truck, makes my stomach clench.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

I rise and approach the recliner. “I’m sorry.”

Her plump lips press together and anger flashes in her brown eyes.

“I shouldn’t have left you for so long. I lost track of time.”

“The cans are broken,” she tells me, her words clipped with irritation.

I frown in confusion and then it hits me. The fruit. They don’t have the pull tabs like the ones she’s used to.

“Oh, shit,” I growl. “Eve, I’m sorry.”

She turns back around to watch the television. Ross is rubbing white shit all over his legs trying to get back into his leather pants under the guidance of Joey over the phone. I let out a sigh and walk into my kitchen.

What the fuck?

There’s an empty pickle jar, an empty pudding cup, and an empty ketchup bottle neatly lined up on the counter. Droplets of what looks like mustard are everywhere. Did she seriously eat my condiments? Now I feel like the worst asshole on the planet.

I’ll make it up to her.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Atticus,” she shrieks as she clambers out of the chair.

Sad, pleading eyes. Trembling lip. Tears welling.

Jesus.

“Hey,” I say softly. “I have some gifts for you in the truck. Let me grab them. I’m not going anywhere else.”

Her eyes narrow as though she doesn’t believe me. Gently, I stroke her cheek, pushing a wet strand of hair behind her ear. She flutters her eyes closed and leans into my touch. I stare at her dark lashes on her apple cheeks and her soft, pillow lips for a moment longer than I should before breaking away.

Fifteen minutes later, I’ve brought in all of my haul. She paces the kitchen, her eyes wide with anticipation, and the dog wags his tail.

“I got you a knife,” I tell her, pulling it from my pocket.

She flashes me a half smile. “Your knives are useless.”

“You’re welcome,” I tease as I hand it over.

“I went to my parents’ house and Ma made me stay for lunch. But then, my sister Judith and I, we went to the store. Bought all kinds of stuff. Judith made it her mission to make you a care package.”

Eve blinks at me and cocks her head slightly as I hand her over one of the sacks. Tampons. Pads. Chocolate. Even some makeup as if Eve would know what to do with it. I didn’t stop my sister. Just let her do her thing. She pulls out a flashlight keychain. Eve pushes the button and exclaims with excitement. Another push of the button and it starts vibrating.

No, she didn’t just give Eve a vibrator.

Eve stares at it in wonder, the cranks inside her head working as she makes sense of the object.

“Maybe you should give that to me—”

“Mine!”

I lift both my brows as she glowers at me, holding it to her chest. She mashes the button to turn it back off but doesn’t relinquish it. Whatever.

“She sent a whole bag of her old clothes and picked you out some undergarments at the store. You should be all set in the clothing department.”

“Food.”

“Right. Your favorite.”

I pull items out of the bag, secretly enjoying how she picks up each thing and curiously inspects them. She holds up a red package and sniffs it. Chewy Chips Ahoy. I peel back the top and offer her a cookie.

“I like the smell,” she says, bringing it to her nose. Her pink tongue darts out to taste it. Brown eyes widen as she bites into it. Then, they flutter closed as she moans. My dick takes fucking note.

“Yeah, Judith said you’d love those.”

She devours six in a row before I close the flap, earning me an angry growl.

“You can’t eat too many or you’ll make yourself sick. Especially since you haven’t had a proper meal today. Luckily, my mom sent me back with some leftovers.”

She roots around in the bags while I reheat the chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans. By the time I finish microwaving it, both her and the dog are hovering. I toss him a piece of chicken and hand her the plate. Rather than bothering with a fork, she dives in, scooping it out with her fingers.

“Fork,” I say gently. “In my house, we use silverware.”

Her brows crash together and she makes a huffy sound before yanking open the drawer. She locates a fork inside. After stomping back over to the table with her plate, she sits and then loudly stabs at the green beans.

Hormonal woman.

Girl.

She’s a girl, not a woman.

I fixate on the way she licks her juicy lips. I wish I were fifteen or however old the fuck she is so I could suck away that grease from her bottom lip. My dick strains in my jeans, desperate to join the party.

After she eats, I pull out the peach cobbler my mom made. Once it’s reheated, I set it on the table beside her plate.

“Peach cobbler,” I explain.

“Fresh peaches?”

I smile. “The freshest. I also bought some peaches for you.” I dig around in a bag until I find them. When I show her, her head cocks to the side as she studies it. “See, it’s fuzzy.”

Her fingers reach out to touch it. A smile curves her lips up as she strokes the peach. “Soft.”

“And juicy.”

“Sweet?”

“Very.” My voice is rough and I clear my throat. “I’ll get this all put away. Then we can watch a movie or something together.”

I busy myself with the groceries until she makes another moaning noise. I whip my head around to find her inhaling the cobbler. My mother's peach cobbler has that effect on everyone.

"Good?"

"Mmm," is all she says as she licks the container.

One thing I will admit to myself is I enjoy watching her try new things. I don't know what to make of my creepy fixation on Eve, but it's been there for years. Ever since I saw her wide, distrusting eyes behind her dirty hair. I wanted to earn her trust and friendship. Now, years later, something inside me aches for more. It's not fucking cool, but still there.

She puts the plate down on the floor and the dog takes to licking it clean. Her brown eyes lift to mine and gleam with something I've never quite seen. Happiness.

All I can do is stare.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

eve

He hands me the sack filled with unfamiliar items. I'm careful to hide the light stick so he doesn't take it. Earlier, he looked angry about me having it. And the way it buzzed gave me an idea. One that I don't want him to know about.

I carry the sack and the bag filled with garments to his room. After setting them on the bed, I rifle through the bag until I find smaller underwear. Black and soft. I instantly like the way the material feels in my fingers.

"Do you, um, do you know what to do with that stuff?"

His voice from the doorway behind me makes me jump. I don't answer him. I just wait for him to explain what it is I'm supposed to do. With a resigned huff, he walks into the room and pulls out a box.

"These are tampons. They, um..." He stalls and scratches his beard. "They go inside you. To soak up the bleeding."

It sounds painful.

Like all the times my brothers and Papa were inside me.

Shuddering, I swat it out of his hand. "No."

"Okay," he agrees. "I wasn't exactly keen on explaining how to do that anyway. The pads are easier. It's like the towel, but you can throw them away." Then he smirks at me. "Like you threw out my mustard. Why did you do that anyway?"

"Yuck," I growl.

He laughs and it warms me to my core. "Point taken. Some of us like mustard. I put it back in the fridge. Keep it around for me, okay?"

I nod, though I don't understand how anyone could like such vile tasting things.

"Anyway, uh, let me show you how this thing goes on the underwear." He tears open the film on the pack and pulls out a yellow thing. "This is a pad. To open it, just pull back this tape." It all unfolds brilliantly and then he tosses away the yellow film. He picks up the black underwear. "Then, you peel off this part so that you can stick it inside your panties, er, underwear."

"Panties?"

"That's what girls sometimes call these."

"Panties." I smile. I like that word.

He shakes his head, chuckling. "So, yeah. You then put them on and—Jesus, Eve, I meant when I go in the other room." He quickly turns away from me.

I kick out of his pants and take the panties from him. They fit snugly and the pad seems efficient and less messy. I like panties and pads. I locate some thin pants that are red and black. They're soft like his bedding and it makes me want to wear them. I pull them on and am delighted to see they fit snugly without having them swallow me up like his pants do.

He peeks over his shoulder. "Warn a guy before you take off your clothes."

"You have seen me naked."

His cheeks burn red. "I know and that was a mistake."

Shame ripples through me. "Why?"

"Because you're young. It's not right."

I'm not sure why it makes me angry, but it does. I snatch the soiled clothes up and throw them in the clothes bin he has. Then, I grab my light stick and pocket it before heading to the bathroom.

"Eve..."

I stop in the threshold of the door.

"I'm sorry I'm fucking everything up. I am so out of my element right now." He approaches until he's near. "Your hair is tangled. Did you not brush it after your shower?" A shiver ripples through me when he lightly tugs at my hair. "I could brush it for you if you want."

I like his touch, so I nod.

"Where do you want me to brush it? In the living room again?"

"The black box is loud," I grumble.

“Television.”

“It’s loud.”

“I’ll show you how to work it so you can turn it off or down. We can turn on some music instead.”

Music.

I have memories of my sister singing Bible songs and more recently I’ve heard Devon singing to her children. I like music.

“Yes,” I agree.

He grabs the brush and we head back into the living room. After mashing buttons on the thing he calls a remote, he turns it to a station that plays music. Rich, vibrant sounds come out and my heart races.

“I like this,” I tell him.

“Everyone likes Led Zeppelin.” He chuckles as he guides me to sit in his lap. “I figure if you’re going to listen to music, you may as well listen to what I like.”

He runs the brush through my tangles. It feels good. Each little tug. My stomach is full, I’m warm, and I’m not afraid. Plus, Atticus is back and he’s touching me. This feels like happiness. Once my hair is all brushed out, he sets the brush on the table beside his chair and pats my thigh. Rather than getting up, I lean back against him. He’s stiff, but after a moment, he leans his head against mine. It feels nice. Warm and cozy.

“How’s your wound?” His breathy words tickle the side of my face.

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“Liar.”

“It doesn’t,” I argue.

“You just don’t want more paste.”

I turn to look at him. My nose brushes against his, but he doesn’t pull away. “Do you want to put more paste on?”

His cock grows hard beneath me. The urge to rub against it is strong, but I refrain just barely.

“I think you can manage on your own,” he whispers.

“Then, no.”

He scowls. “Anyone ever tell you you’re stubborn?”

I reach up and smooth out the wrinkle between his brows. “I like it when you touch me.”

His eyes squeeze shut. “You make this really fucking difficult.” His thumb rubs circles on my hip over my pants.

“What?”

“Being around you.”

I flinch at his words. “Why don’t you like being around me?”

“I didn’t say that,” he growls, his words rumbling through me. “It’s just hard not to touch you when you’re practically begging me to.”

“I don’t understand why you don’t want to touch me anymore.”

“Are we going to go round and round about this?”

I sit up abruptly, jerking away from him. He grabs my hip before I can get up. I freeze at his touch. Then, he slides his palm up to my stomach over my shirt and pulls me back to him. All tension bleeds away as I relax in his hold. He claims not to want to touch me, but he caresses my stomach in a way that makes me melt inside.

“You should go to bed soon,” he says, his voice gruff.

“Only if you come with me.”

“Stubborn.”

“You are the same,” I argue. “Same as me.”

He chuckles. “Point taken. Fine, but we need to put a pillow between us. Last night can’t happen again. I want you to feel safe here and if I can’t keep my hands off you in my sleep, that’s dangerous.”

“Gentle bear,” I murmur. “Not dangerous.”

“Not very smart for a little fox to willingly go to bed with a bear.”

“Bears are warm.”

“Sometimes I feel like you use me for my body heat,” he says, a smile in his voice.

“And your fruit.”

This earns her a hearty laugh.

I’ve won our argument and it thrills me.



No. No. No.

My father sucks on my neck and I want to die. Right now. Just fade out of this world and find Esther. In heaven? I’d take hell at this point. Anything is preferable to the way he threatens to split me open with his manhood.

*Every night.
Every single night.
More of the same.*

Hot tears leak out, but I don't dare make a sound. Part of my training, I've learned, is that if I cry or fight it, I earn the switch. My bottom is still scabbed over from the last whipping. He fills me with his heat and then he's gone.

*Just like that.
I let out a sigh of relief.*

His snores soon fill the room and I make my escape. I've just exited the bedroom when two strong hands grip my shoulder. Ezekiel. I start to open my mouth to scream, but he's faster. Stronger. Meaner.

*I pray for God to strike me down.
I can't take this anymore.*



“Eve!”

I jolt, my body trembling in fear.

“Eve, it’s me. Atticus. You’re safe.” His rumbled words in the dark calm me.

Rolling toward the sound, I clench onto his shirt, burying my tearstained face against his neck. He hugs me to him, running his fingers through my hair.

“Bad dream?”

“Memory,” I murmur.

He tenses. “I’m sorry for what they did.”

Why is he sorry all the time?

“I’m glad Reed killed them all.”

“Me too,” he murmurs. “Sleep now, little fox. I’ve got you.”

I can’t sleep, though.

Not when my dreams haunt me.

In the dark, I seek out Atticus’s face with my fingertips. I touch his wiry beard and his smooth cheek above it. I can’t see his eyes, but I feel them

watching me somehow. Seeing me. Finding me like Blind Bear found me. Through instinct. Through smell. Through touch. I brush my fingertip down his nose and then gingerly touch his mouth. His lips pucker against my fingertip, making me smile. I withdraw my hand and find his mouth with mine. He starts to move away, but I latch my fingers in his long hair and keep him where I want him. I press soft kisses to his mouth. It's nice except he isn't kissing me back. The rejection stings.

And then it happens.

A pucker.

A kiss.

My heart flutters wildly in my chest.

It makes me want to taste him. To see if he tastes different than the monsters from my dreams. I lick his bottom lip, making him groan. Then, his warm, wet tongue lashes out, sliding against mine. We both make similar sounds of pleasure. I take advantage of his parted mouth and kiss him harder.

He curses and rolls onto his back, as though he's done with the kiss. I don't like how he tries to talk himself out of touching me. So, I take matters into my own hands. I straddle his waist and find his mouth again. His fingers bite harshly into my hips, but he doesn't pull me away.

The kiss heats me to the point I'm sweating. I pull away long enough to rip off my shirt.

"Eve." His voice sounds like a warning.

Ignoring the warning, I kiss him again. He's stiff at first, but then he gives in, offering me his tasty tongue. I run my own over his teeth, marveling once again at how perfect they are. His palm slides up my bare ribs, caressing me. I crave for him to touch me everywhere.

After kissing until the sun comes up, he finally breaks free and rolls us so I'm flat on my back. He keeps a protective arm around me and nuzzles his face in my ear.

"Go to sleep, Eve."

Exhausted and happy, I oblige.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

atticus

I'm a sick fuck.

It's the only way to explain the fact I'm hard as stone right now. How I'm possessive as fuck with Eve pretty much smashed beneath my heavy limbs. The morning light pours in through the window, blanketing her half naked form. Her small tits are on full display. I could lie to myself and say I'm staring at her pink, pebbled nipples because I'm inspecting her chest wounds that are in fact healing nicely. But I can't lie. I'm fascinated by every part of her. And so is my dick.

Her mocha eyes flutter open and she stares at me, one corner of her lips turned up. With her clean brown hair spilled all over her pillow and an almost smile on her face, she's never looked so serene and peaceful. Every time I've seen Eve out in the wilderness, she was worried and fearful. Always scrounging for her next meal.

Here, she's relaxed.

This is how she should be. No teenage girl should have to live the way she does. Cold. Alone. Afraid.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, dipping my chin to indicate her chest.

"Good." Her stomach growls and I press my palm to it.

Brown eyes dart to mine, locking me in place. I run my thumb over her soft skin. "You want breakfast?" My words are rough and gritty.

"Oatmeal."

I slide my fingers up her flesh, careful not to touch the red, angry, puckered flesh that's healing from her bear attack. My fingertip brushes over her nipple. She bites on her bottom lip, her eyes intense as they bore into me. I give the nipple a little pinch before pulling away completely.

“Sorry,” I grumble.

“I like when you touch me.”

My cock jumps in my boxers at her breathy words. The little angel of morality that normally sits on my shoulder has disappeared. I keep wondering what Reed would say. Would he tell me to just follow my heart?

My heart’s been following *her* for years.

Completely unacceptable.

Yet, I don’t care in this moment.

Leaning forward, I lick the silky skin on her neck. Her fingers thread into my hair, tugging when I playfully nip at her flesh. I suck on her skin hard enough it will most definitely leave a hickey. The thought of seeing the purple mark has me nearly nutting in my underwear. I kiss down her neck to her collarbone, unsure what I have planned next, but it’s nothing sensible, that’s for damn sure. Her breath hisses when I avoid her wound and then flick my tongue out to taste her small nipple.

“Atticus,” she hisses.

My name sounds good coming from her lips. I suck the tiny bud between my lips and then gently bite. A moan escapes her, making my dick leak with pre-cum. Fuck, I need to stop. I really should. She just tastes so sweet. I’m imagining what it would feel like to peel away her pants and panties before sliding into her tight, blood-soaked cunt, when Blind Bear starts growling and barking.

I’m out of the bed, my boner pointing the way, before I even take my next breath. I snag a Glock from my drawer and run to the front door. As soon as I see the face peeking in, my racing heart slows.

Suma.

I open the door, shivering against the cold, and usher her inside. “It’s early, woman.”

“I came to check on the child.”

Child.

Between seeing Suma and that comment, boner officially gone.

“Right,” I mutter. “Let me go wake her. Help yourself to some coffee.”

Suma’s eyes narrow, but I ignore her probing gaze of me in nothing but my boxers. I find Eve sitting up in bed, the covers pulled up, hiding her nakedness. Her brown hair is in messy disarray. Fuck, she does my head in.

“Suma Walkingstick is here. She’s the one who made the healing paste. Can you get dressed? She’s going to want to check you over again.”

Eve's brows furl. "No."

I refrain from rolling my eyes. "No's not an answer I'll accept. Let her check you out and then I'll make breakfast. Come on."

Her nostrils flare and her brown eyes shine with anger. Well, she can get pissed off all she wants. When it comes to her health, I won't fucking budge. She throws on a shirt and then disappears into the bathroom. I dress in some sweats and a hoodie before making my way back to where Suma is standing in the kitchen. Wordlessly, we work together to make breakfast. I know Eve mentioned oatmeal, but I'll make her something she's going to love. Yesterday, I brought back stuff to make pancakes and bacon. I figure while Eve is here, she can taste the finer things in life.

We're just finishing up when Eve walks in, glaring at Suma with suspicion, her blind dog at her feet. She's wearing jeans that belonged to my sister, a pink, cashmere sweater, and green socks with frogs on them. I gape at her. She's never looked so...normal.

"Ahh, girl," Suma greets. "Let me look at you."

Eve takes a step back, her eyes darting my way.

"Maybe after breakfast," I tell Suma gently. "No one likes cold pancakes."

Suma shoots me a questioning look, but I simply shrug. We set to making our plates while Eve sits. I cut her food into bite-sized pieces before soaking them in syrup. Her eyes widen when I set the plate in front of her.

"You'll love syrup," I assure her.

She reaches for a syrup-drenched square with her fingers, but then picks up a fork at the last moment. After a stab and then shoving it into her mouth, her eyes widen. A garbled "mmm" rattles up her throat as she starts inhaling the food.

"The child likes the syrup. Reminds me of another child long ago."

I stand at the counter, watching Eve eat while absently chomping on bacon. I toss pieces to Blind Bear, who seems pleased with the savory taste. Suma sits in the other chair, her eyes darting back and forth between us.

As soon as we're finished, Suma speaks up.

"Let us take a look," Suma says gently. She rises and motions for Eve to follow her.

"Atticus," Eve barks out, panic flashing in her eyes.

"Alone," Suma replies.

"No." Eve glowers at her as though she's the enemy.

“Just do it right here. She’s nervous around new people,” I explain.

Suma shoots me a frown. “Avert your eyes.” Then she says to Eve, “Take off your shirt.”

Eve bursts from the chair, nearly tripping over the dog, to cling to my hoodie. “No,” she hisses.

Absently, I stroke my fingers through her hair. The urge to find the brush and comb through it is strong, and if Suma weren’t here, I’d suggest just that.

Suma gives me a withering look. “I need to check the wounds, Atticus.”

“Hey,” I say to Eve. “Let’s take off this sweater so she can look. I’ll be right here.” Gently, I turn her around to face Suma.

Eve makes a growling sound of frustration and then rips the sweater off her head, tossing it on the floor. Her body trembles with anger or fear, I’m not sure. I pull her hair off to one side and kiss her shoulder to calm her.

Suma clears her throat and I freeze, realizing what I’ve done. Losing my fucking mind is what. I start to back away, but Eve leans into my chest, her fists grabbing the bottom of my hoodie.

“They look much better,” Suma says, walking slowly toward us. She squints as she inspects the claw marks. Eve flinches when Suma touches her skin with her weathered hands. “What’s this?”

I peer down to look where she’s pointing and notice the hickey. My cock hardens against Eve’s back.

“Um,” I mutter, clearing my throat. “Looks like a bruise.”

Suma’s eyes are sharp when they meet mine. “This bruise wasn’t here last I checked.”

Eve, having enough with Suma’s probing, turns again in my arms, burying her face against my chest. I should be pushing her away, not holding her half-naked body against mine.

“If we’re done here, I need to brush her hair,” I say lamely. Anything to just get her out of my house. I don’t like the way she’s looking at the way I hold Eve. It’s not like that.

Maybe it is, but it doesn’t mean I want a fucking audience.

Suma bends to pick up the sweater and sets it on the counter. “How old are you, child?”

Eve ignores her.

“How old do you think she is?” she asks me this time.

“I don’t know. Eighteen,” I lie.

Suma snorts. "You will not hear it from me, but rest assured, you will hear it from someone like Will."

My brother.

The cop.

"Hear what?" I growl.

"You know what." Her eyes dip to Eve. "They put men in prison for these types of things."

Anger flashes hot inside me. "I haven't done anything, Suma."

"But you will."

With those words, she gathers her things and slips out of my house. Eve tilts her head up to look at me. Her gaze is soft as she regards me. I fucking love this look on her. How has she gotten me so twisted in a matter of days? I'm a wreck right now.

I'm not straddling a line between good and evil.

I'm simply holding good in my arms.

It doesn't feel fucking evil.

It feels right.

"I should brush your hair now," I murmur, my eyes locked on her plump lips. "Or I could teach you to do it yourself."

She growls. "You."

Stubborn girl.

"Uh, put your sweater back on. This is distracting."

Eve pouts, clearly annoyed, but slips the sweater back on. Once we're safe from my roaming eyes drinking up her tits, I can think better.

The kitchen needs cleaning. Chores need doing. My life needs sorting.

I ignore it all to guide her to my recliner and to pull her into my lap. She's relaxed as I start brushing. I take my time, enjoying the soft, breathy sounds that come from her. My dick is hard as stone, but we both ignore the way it presses against her ass. When her hair is silky smooth, I set the brush down and wrap my arms around her as she curls against me.

My heart beats louder when she's in my arms.

I like the cadence when she's around.

Hard, persistent, hungry.

One day she'll be gone and I wonder if it'll thump at all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

eve

I've become complacent. Wedged myself into a routine that revolves around eating, cuddling, and being lazy. I like this little niche of the world with Atticus, but something inside me continues to gnaw. Feeding on me like a wolf as it devours a deer. Strip by strip, it breaks me down until I'm weak and useless.

Each night, Atticus holds me. Kisses me in the dark. Marks my flesh with his lips. Touches my breasts.

But that's it.

The need for him grows to the point I want to rage at him and demand he do something about it. I note that Atticus prefers the dark when we come together. He hides there. From me. From his self-imposed rules. From the memory of the look on Suma's face.

Irritation burns in my gut.

I saw the looks.

Suma didn't think I was good enough for Atticus. Some wild thing who isn't worthy to have someone like him as her husband. I'd wanted to shove her out of the cabin myself. That was a full week ago and I still can't get her disapproving stare out of my mind.

I take a quick shower and am thankful I no longer have to wear the pads. Atticus has been busying himself chopping on a tree that fell when it couldn't bear the weight of the snow. I'd wanted to follow after him, but he told me I had to stay inside.

Why?

All I ever do is stay inside.

Shower. Eat. Watch *Friends*.

I think about how Chandler and Monica are together. It's so unlike what I remember with my own family. Monica has rights. She has a say in their relationship. She presses Chandler's buttons and he still has a goofy look for her by the end of the show when the words come on. It makes my heart hurt. It doesn't feel real, but it feels like something I want.

With Atticus.

Not some random man. Just him. He's good to me and sometimes he looks at me the same way Chandler does Monica. A half smile and glittering green eyes.

Knowing he won't be in for a while, I sneak out my light stick. Atticus hasn't asked for it since I hid it away. His sister sent it as a gift to me. While it's handy with the light that comes on at the touch of a button, it's the vibrating aspect I've been curious about. Now that I'm no longer menstruating and he's out, I decide to give it a try.

I take off my jeans and tear away my shirt. The panties I'm wearing are pink and silky. They're my favorites. Atticus showed me how to run the washing machine and I wash them every day so I can wear them often.

Climbing onto the bed, I look down at my mostly naked skin. My wound is better and my usual bones in my ribs aren't protruding as much. I've put on a little weight this week because food is readily available. It's wonderful. My mind drifts to peanut butter and I just about moan in pleasure. This world is clever to come up with such things.

Focus.

I can think about food later.

Right now, I want to think about him.

His chest, bare and sculpted. Broad shoulders. Golden hair hanging down around his face. Mischievous green eyes. Heavily defined muscles in his abdomen that seem to point to his cock. And teeth. He has such lovely, white teeth.

I press the button on the light stick and it starts buzzing. Knowing exactly where I want the device, I rub it over my panties, right along the slit. My body lights up with anticipation. The nub is easy to find as it pulsates with the need for attention. I caress the area through my panties, letting the vibrations shoot spikes of bliss through me. It's an exhilarating feeling. I'm close to the edge of happiness when I hear the front door open.

I don't stop.

Not when I hear my name called.

Not when footsteps thump down the hall.

Not when I feel his heated stare on me.

My eyes drift to his. Shock. Anger. Hunger. His features morph as he processes what I'm doing. I bite down on my bottom lip to keep from crying out. My hips lift and rotate, seeking out the ultimate pleasure I know is coming. Through his jeans, I see the clear outline of his cock. Hard and at attention. I lick my lips, fixated on the size of it. I'm about to lose control when the buzzing slows.

Slows.

Slows.

Stops.

I growl and Atticus laughs.

My chest heaves with exertion and I frantically mash at the button.

"The batteries died. Those things are cheap," he says, prowling my way, an unreadable expression on his face. "I'll have to get you more batteries."

"Now," I order.

He laughs again. "Next time I'm in town. I don't have any of that kind."

A hopeless, horrified sound rattles up my throat.

His thighs touch the side of the bed and he absently runs his knuckle up my leg from my knee to my thigh. "I could help."

I sit up on my elbows, shocked at his words. "You will touch me?"

In this moment, there's no hesitation. It's like when we're in the dark. His eyes have a predatory glint that doesn't frighten me. It excites me. I start to push down my panties, but he halts me with a gentle pat to my hand.

"Keep them on. I need...I need insurance."

I don't know what insurance is, but I trust him. I give him a curt nod.

"Scoot to the middle of the bed," he instructs before peeling off his sweatshirt.

My eyes are glued to his muscular chest as I obey his command. He kicks out of his boots before climbing on the bed. I stare in awe as his muscles tighten and ripple with each move he makes. His large, powerful hands that are cold from being outside grip my knees and he parts me.

Before I can ask what he's doing, he drops close to my center and inhales me. A thrill shoots up my spine with anticipation. His nose rubs against my sensitive nub through the material. I arch my back, letting out a breathy moan.

“You smell good,” he growls. His tongue darts out and he teases the nub with it. Even over my panties, it’s the most wonderful thing I’ve ever felt.

“Atticus,” I croak out, my fingers diving into his hair.

He nibbles at the nub and when he gets it between his teeth, he playfully tugs. Then, his tongue swipes back out, teasing the throbbing flesh. His finger hooks into the side of the panties and he pulls it aside. The moment his tongue meets my bare flesh, I squeal. Green, blazing eyes lock with mine, silently asking me questions.

Am I okay?

“Don’t stop,” I breathe. I know he needs the words and I’m not afraid to say them.

His tongue begins lapping at the juices leaking from my body. He sucks and licks and slurps, hungry for everything I have to give. I arch off the bed when he spears me with his tongue, much like a cock would. It’s hot and wet and slippery—the most chaotic explosion of sensations I’ve ever known. His tongue drifts lower and he teases my other hole. Whiskers scratch and tickle my soft skin on my inner thighs. He’ll make me raw with them and that’s okay as long as he doesn’t stop.

I lose all sense of reality as he devours each hidden part of me. My ache consumes me. I’m feverish with the need to be eaten alive by my big bear. He finds my nub again, greedy and ravenous. The tip of his finger teases at my slippery hole and then he slides it inside of me. He’s thick and my body stretches to accommodate him.

I’m unsure why my body responds positively to him, but I don’t question it. I live in this moment, giving him full control to bring me pleasure. His finger curls up inside me, pressing into a part of me that makes me see stars.

“Oh,” I gasp out. “Ohhhh!”

He nips at my throbbing flesh, moving his finger with expert precision inside of me. Everything turns black before exploding with color. I scream out his name as I thrash in pleasure, my entire body convulsing from it. I’m still trembling when he pulls his finger out and rights my panties. Then, he presses a kiss on the nub before sitting up on his knees.

I’m about to pull him on top of me and let him do things I’ve never wanted before when he bolts off the bed. He nearly trips over his boots and then he rushes into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him. The

shower turns on. I climb off the bed on shaky legs, trailing after him. When I try the door, I find it locked.

Hurt burns inside me. My eyes prickle with tears. I press my ear to the door and listen to the soft moans as he finds his own pleasure. Alone.

I would have given it to him.

He didn't have to shut me out.

Blind Bear whines from the corner of the room. Defeated, I push out of my panties and hunt down a new pair. I'll wear Atticus down eventually. He won't have to train me how to be a good wife as I already know. With him, I want to be one.

I throw on my jeans and a black sweatshirt before finding some striped pink socks. I love the clothes Judith sent for me. The rags I wore before stank and had holes in them. These all feel so soft and fit me perfectly and have bright colors. I pull on the boots she sent and then locate the big black coat. Once I'm bundled up, I call for Blind Bear and we step outside. I shove my hands in my pockets to retrieve my gloves and then grip my knife inside.

The cold air bites at my face. It's harsh and unforgiving. Trapped inside with Atticus, I become some other girl. Not the same one who lived each day with one goal in mind. Survival. Now, I enjoy small moments, but something feels incomplete. Is it because he still pushes me away when all I want is to be wrapped around him? I still crave the exhilaration out there, but without him, it feels incomplete too.

I need to hunt.

Sure, I could go inside right now and eat macaroni and cheese. Another wonderful creation by the human race. It would be delicious and warm my soul. Atticus calls it comfort food and he's right about that.

Comfort makes you stupid, though.

What happens if he decides he no longer wants me in his home? When he deems I'm healed, will he take me back to my little shack in the woods and drop me off? I will be spoiled to the ease of town living and my survival instincts will suffer the blow.

I need practice.

I need to remember that I can still do it.

Step after step, I walk deeper into the snowy forest. It'll be dark soon. I should turn back. Instead, I find a tree that I can rip the thin limbs from. Perfect length and width to make a trap. The squirrels and rabbits are

plentiful near his home, and I could use some new pelts for when I have to leave.

I'd be foolish not to start collecting and stockpiling supplies for that moment. Shame burns in my gut. I've become complacent. No more. I'll start gathering and preparing for my departure so I'm not caught off guard.

Blind Bear whines as though he can sense my unhappiness. I bend to scratch him behind his ears.

"Don't worry," I coo. "I'm taking you when I go. You belong out there with me."

"Eve!"

Blind Bear whimpers, turning his head back toward the cabin.

"He won't come with us," I mutter, breaking the sad news to my dog. "Just you and me."

"Eve!"

Blind Bear, unable to ignore Atticus, barks and takes off running toward him. I follow him from the thicket, dropping a few of the limbs I collected at the tree line to grab later. Atticus stands on the porch, his hair still wet, and barely dressed. His expression is wild and worried. My stomach flutters.

"What?"

He frowns. "Don't what me, woman. Get back in the house before you freeze your ass off."

My brow hikes up as I drag my gaze down his front. He has a sweatshirt on and sweatpants. His feet are bare. His body shakes against the cold.

"I have a coat and shoes and gloves. You have nothing." I smirk at him.

With a roll of his eyes, he motions for me to come back inside. I follow after him and once the door is closed, I inspect the small cabin.

I feel trapped.

Like a small rabbit that ran into a shelter for the promise of food, only to discover there was no way out.

"I can't stay here any longer," I admit, tears stinging my eyes. "I can't."

He scowls and shakes his head. "We'll go into town. A nice change of routine will do you some good."

I would think he misunderstands me, but the intense, challenging glare states otherwise. He knows what I mean and doesn't want to hear of it.

"Atticus..."

“Is it because I touched you? Because of what we did?” His cheeks tinge pink and panic dances in his green eyes.

“I liked that.” What I didn’t like was that he ran from it.

He lets out a heavy sigh. “I liked that too.” His palm scrubs down his face. “I’m out of my depth here, Eve. I want...I want things I shouldn’t. I’m too weak to turn away from them. When I see you—kiss and touch you—I don’t see the fact you’re a teenager. I just see you.”

“I see you too.”

“How old are you?” he asks, his eyes pleading.

I don’t know what the right answer here is, though. He seems to think there’s an acceptable age I must be and if I haven’t reached it, he doesn’t want any part of me.

“Old enough to marry and bear children.”

He snorts. “That doesn’t answer my question. Sixteen?”

Is this the number he wishes for?

“Yes.”

His body tenses, which means I’ve chosen the wrong number. I’m about to bark out some other numbers to see if those are the correct ones, but he stops me by pulling me to him for a hug.

“I can’t...we can’t do that stuff anymore, Eve. It’s not right.”

The finality in his voice makes my chest ache. I knew it was coming. I could feel it in my bones. Still, I wasn’t ready for his words to feel so final and unbreakable.

“But I liked when your mouth was on my nub and inside me,” I murmur.

His cock is hard between us. “I liked that too, but that was before I really knew how old you were. It was a mistake. I’m a fucking adult and responsible for you right now. I need to act like one.” He pets my hair and kisses the top of my head. “No more of that stuff.”

I tremble in his arms. “Do I have to leave now?”

He grips my shoulders and pushes me away to glare at me. “What? You think because I can’t fuck you like I’m losing my mind to that I’ll kick you to the curb? I may have crossed the line with you, but I’m not an asshole. Of course you’re not leaving.”

“Okay.”

His gaze softens as he stares for a long moment. I stare right back, drinking up every lovely detail of him. When he’s had his fill, he smiles.

“I’m taking you out. You need a change of scenery.”

“Out hunting?”

“No, Eve. I’m going to let you be a teenage girl. Take you out for burgers and a movie or something. Something normal. You need to experience the world some.”

Normally, that thought would terrify me.

But boredom has me nodding my head.

This earns me a devilish smile that makes my knees nearly wobble beneath me.

“Be ready to go in ten minutes.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

atticus

Sixteen.

Sixfuckingteen.

The unknown was better. Then, I could pretend and deny the fact she was young. We never knew how old she was, but Reed and I had our own ideas. He thought she was younger and I thought she was older. The average age we came up with recently was sixteen. I'd hoped she was eighteen, but that hope was for nothing. And unlike Reed, I'm not all about fucking a teenager.

My dick jolts at the memory of how she whimpered and begged when I had my mouth on her cunt. So maybe I am all about fucking a teenager, but that doesn't mean I'm actually going to do it. I just secretly crave it. A fucking fantasy I'll never live out.

Focus.

She needs to get out of the cabin because she's going stir crazy. I need to get out of the cabin so I don't pounce on her and put my dick in her. We need space and normalcy.

"Will Blind Bear be okay while we're gone?" she asks, frowning as we trudge through the snow toward my truck.

"He looked mighty cozy in the middle of my bed," I grumble. "Besides, we can't take that dog with us everywhere we go in town. We'll only be gone a couple of hours. He'll be fine."

I open her truck door and then grab her tiny hips, hoisting her into the cab. She weighs nothing despite the food she's been inhaling all week. At least she doesn't look so gaunt and bony anymore.

After turning on the truck, I wait for the heater to blast. Once it's cozy, I hop back out to scrape the windows free of ice. It takes about fifteen minutes, but eventually, we're ready to go.

"Music?" I ask, reaching for the dial.

She nods. "Led Zeppelin."

"There's my girl." I wince at my words, but she doesn't seem to notice. I scroll through my satellite radio until I find a Led Zeppelin channel. "Whole Lotta Love" starts playing and I drum my fingers on the steering wheel.

Eve grins at me.

Fuck.

This girl is inside me now and I don't know how to get her out.

I have to get her out.

As much as I'd love to taste that forbidden fruit, I don't feel like going to prison over it. Suma was wrong. I won't cross the line.

The drive to town is long because of all the snow. We pass by several shops on Main Street that are lit up. Her eyes are glued to the sights, drinking them all in. A flutter of pride flits through me knowing I'm giving this gift to her. The smile on my face falls the moment we pass by the police station. Will's truck sits out front. I haven't told Will I'm back in town, but I'm sure Mom passed on that tidbit of information. I'll need to call him just to keep him from dropping in for a surprise visit.

Suma caught me defiling Eve. With her, I got dirty looks. With Will, he'd put my ass in cuffs. Will doesn't play around with that shit. Brother or not, he'd lock my ass up.

"There's a great restaurant here in town called Muskies. Has a little of everything. Sound good?"

"Peanut butter?" she asks, her eyes wide and shining.

"Babe, peanut butter is so easy to come by, it's not even funny." I wince at the pet name. "Muskies has other good stuff. New stuff you haven't tried. I promise you'll love it."

"Yes."

I laugh. "Okay then."

The parking lot is nearly empty, which works for me. I wasn't really looking forward to an audience. This town is too small. Everyone knows everyone. I'd be hit with a barrage of questions I wasn't ready to answer.

We climb out and I place my hand on her back to guide her inside. I'm not familiar with the hostess, which makes me sigh in relief. She walks us over to a booth in a dark corner. Eve sits down on one side. When I start for the other side, she shakes her head.

"No."

"If we sit on the same side—"

"Here," she says in her bossy, stubborn voice, slapping the leather with her hand.

I start to put my foot down and tell her it wouldn't be appropriate, but then I see the slight tremble in her hand. She's nervous. And here I am wanting to abandon her ass.

"Right," I grumble. "As you wish, my queen."

Her smile is a breathtaking reward that I happily take. Once I'm seated, she scoots closer, resting her head to my shoulder. So much for boundaries.

"Hiya there," a waiter says as he struts over to our table. He doesn't look any older than my nephew Evan.

"Hey," I grunt out.

"What can I get you and your beautiful daughter to drink?"

I freeze at his words and snap my head up to look at him. The kid is staring goofily at Eve. Lovesick kind of goofy. Possessiveness coils around my heart and sinks its teeth in.

"She's not my daughter," I say in a low, threatening tone.

The kid, completely clueless, shrugs. "Cool. We have Pepsi products."

"What do you want to drink?" I ask Eve, not sounding unlike a father. That grates on my nerves. Eve's not some idiot kid like this one taking our drink order.

"What you have," she squeaks out.

"Two Mountain Dews. And some mozzarella cheese sticks to get us started."

The kid tips his head and saunters off. I crave to wrap my arm around her and pull her against me so he'll know she's mine.

She's not mine.

Still not my fucking daughter, though.

"This place is strange," Eve tells me. "He prepares the food for us?"

"Not exactly. He tells the cook what to prepare."

"Like I tell you when I want oatmeal?"

I chuckle. “Kinda like that.” Then, because I’m curious about her reaction, I say, “That kid liked you.”

Her brows furl. “Liked?”

“Has a crush.”

“Crush?”

“Wants to kiss you and have all your babies,” I joke.

Her features grow stormy. “I don’t want him as a husband. He is weak and small. I want you as my husband.”

For fuck’s sake. Here we go again.

Thankfully, the kid returns with our drinks and appetizer. He openly gawks at Eve.

“Look elsewhere,” she barks at him.

His cheeks turn red and he glances at me in confusion. “Uh, can I get your order?”

“She’s never been here, so I want to give her the true Muskies experience. How about an order of chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, and corn. Then, maybe the mushroom chicken with sweet potato fries, and fried okra. The fried green beans sound good too. Leave a dessert menu too.”

The kid quickly scribbles down our order and rushes off.

“You scared him,” I tease as I unwrap our straws. “Mean Eve.”

Her lip curls up, venom in her glare. “I don’t like him looking at me.”

“I feel sorry for your future boyfriends.”

“Boyfriends?”

I clear my throat as I grab a mozzarella stick. “Yeah. Guys who take you to dinner or the movies. Kiss you. Love you. That sort of thing.”

“Like you.” She smiles so sweetly it makes my heart ache. “Boyfriend.”

“Eh, no, babe, er Eve. I’m nothing to you. Just your friend.”

Her brows furl together. “Mine.”

So she’s a possessive little shit like me.

Wonderful.

“Right. So subject change. These things are fucking amazing. I like it in the red sauce. It’s called marinara, but it’s tasty in ranch too.” I dunk my stick in the marinara and take a bite.

She watches with rapt fascination and then mimics my actions. Her groan of pleasure shoots right to my dick. I’m hard as fuck watching her eat a stupid cheese stick. She licks off a drop of red sauce and then double dips

the stick. I don't correct her because it's not like we haven't already swapped spit before. Once she swallows, she eyes the straw in confusion.

I chuckle. "Like this."

She picks up her drink and wraps her plump lips around the straw. It doesn't help the state of my dick whatsoever. She sucks up the Mountain Dew and then makes a face.

"It burns!"

"It's just carbonation. It's good."

She sips again. And again. And again. As soon as she gulps it all down, she smiles. "It's good. I want more."

I pass her mine and set the empty glass out on the edge for the kid to refill. When he strolls back over, he's more confident than before.

"I thought you looked familiar, man. Are you Will Knox's brother?" he asks, grinning.

"Yeah," I admit.

"No shit! I'm friends with his son, uh your nephew, Evan. We both are seniors and play basketball together. I'm Rex." Then, he turns his attention back on Eve. "You go to school around here?"

"Look away," she hisses again.

"Eve," I growl. "You can't say shit like that."

Rex doesn't seem bothered and waggles his brows at me. "Don't worry. I like a challenge." He whistles as he bounces off.

"Listen," I say, patting her thigh. "Things are different than they are out there in the wild. You can't tell people to look away simply because you don't want to talk to them."

"Why not?"

"Because it's...I don't know...tacky."

"Tacky?"

"Rude. Mean. Cruel."

Her nostrils flare. "I don't like his eyes on me. It reminds me of the way my brothers looked at me."

Well, fuck.

"And how's that?" My voice is husky.

"Like I'm something they could have if only they could get me alone."

Protectiveness washes over me. Sensible me knows the kid is just flirting. But possessive me wants to carve his eyes out so he doesn't make her feel like she's something that can be conquered and owned.

“I’ll protect you,” I whisper, leaning in to kiss her head.

“Because you’re a good husband.”

And fuck if my dick doesn’t jump at her fucked up words.

“I can’t be your husband. You’re sixteen, babe.”

“I already know how to be a wife,” she argues, sounding very much like the teenager she is despite the crazy words escaping her.

“I’m sure you’ll make a great wife one day when you’re older.”

She opens her mouth, but I shove another cheese stick in it. Her brown eyes flare with irritation, but the greasy goodness wins over. We eat in somewhat of an amicable silence until Rex shows back up.

He sets all of our plates down and then plants his dumb ass in the booth across from us. Eve glowers at him, her hand curling around the steak knife sitting on the table. The kid is oblivious. He’s the prey and taunting a fucking predator.

“So, Eve,” Rex says. “Can I have your number?”

“Sixteen,” she hisses hotly as though that is supposed to ward him off.

I guess, technically, it worked for me.

“Cool,” he says with a chuckle. “I’m seventeen. I meant your phone number, though.”

“She doesn’t have a phone,” I tell him. “Sorry, man.”

“No worries. I could be a good boyfriend. Buy you a phone and shit. So we could talk every day.” He grins at her. So naïve.

“I have a boyfriend.” Her words bite out at him. “We talk every day.”

“Lucky guy,” he grumbles. “Do I know him? Shit, is it Evan? That fucker!”

“Atticus.” She turns her pretty face to smile at me.

Oh, fuck no.

Rex’s eyes widen. “Wait? Atticus? This Atticus? How old are you, dude?”

“I’m not her boyfriend,” I attempt to explain.

“We sleep together,” Eve reveals, her words dropping like bombs on our dinner plates.

His eyes dart back and forth, wide and confused. “Oh.”

Yeah, oh.

Fuck.

“Listen,” I tell him with a low growl. “She’s not from around here. She gets her words confused and mixed up. We’re not sleeping together in the

way you're thinking. She's just sleeping at my cabin until I can get her back to her home. Nothing is going on."

The last thing I need is for him to blab that shit to Evan, who will then blab that shit to Will. Fucking hell no.

"None of my business," Rex says, his hand jerking in an awkward way as if to blow it off. "I hope you enjoy your dinner. I'll get out of your hair."

He stands and before he walks away, I grab his arm. "Kid, nothing is happening."

"Yeah, duh. Nothing." He pulls away. "I have other tables to check on."

Eve relaxes once he's gone and I'm all wound up.

"This was a bad idea," I grumble. "People are going to get the wrong impression."

She doesn't fucking care. Simply eats up the mashed potatoes like they're the best thing in the world.

God, I need to get the hell out of here.

And send her back.

That thought makes my chest ache, but it's a necessity.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

eve

“I need supplies.”

He looks up from the sink where he’s scrubbing a pot from lunch earlier and frowns. “Pads? Peanut butter?”

Well, maybe those too eventually.

“More knives. Boots. An ax. A pack like yours to store fruit.”

His eyes bug out of his head. “Why?”

It’s been a week since he took me to Muskies. Since then, we’ve been trapped in this house. But rather than us going back to the way things were, he avoids me. So I’m trapped with someone who doesn’t want to be around me. He’s even taken to sleeping in his chair. He won’t kiss me. And he’s certainly made no moves to touch my body.

I’m angry.

I want to slap and claw at him.

He thought I was cruel to Rex. Well, this is cruel to me. To tease me with the idea of him becoming my husband only to rip it away. He wants me gone—back to my home in the woods—and I want that too. I’ve spent all week making traps and gathering supplies. Now, I want more. Once I have what I need, I’ll go back.

“I want to go home.”

His eyes flash with hurt, which makes no sense considering he’s been ignoring me for the most part all week. “Already?”

“I’m healed,” I bite at him.

He dries off his hands and walks over to me. “But it’s not safe there.”

“It’s not safe here either.”

“What? Why?”

“Each day I spend here, I grow weaker. I won’t be able to survive out there if I don’t leave soon.”

“You’re already surviving here. You don’t need to go out there.” His hand reaches up to caress my cheek. “Please, Eve. Don’t go. Just stay.”

Tears flood my eyes. “Why? You don’t want me for a wife.”

His gaze drops, as does his hand. “Can’t you just stay as my friend?”

“Like Monica?” I challenge.

He snaps his head up. He knows what *friend* I’m talking about. “That’s just a show.”

“They’re friends.”

“It’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re both consenting adults!”

“You throw out these stupid rules that mean nothing to me,” I cry out, tears leaking down my cheek. “You look at me like Chandler looks at Monica. They are husband and wife. They’re friends too. Why can’t we be like them?” My bottom lip wobbles.

He pinches the bridge of his nose and is quiet for a long time. Then, he lifts his hardened stare and pins me in place. “I’ll take you to get supplies.”

I turn on my heel and run outside so he won’t know he just broke my aching heart in two.



Neither of us speaks on the drive into town. He’s gone silent and hasn’t argued on the matter anymore. I feel defeated in ways I’ll never be able to express. I’m just ready to get it all over with. Get away from him and the way he makes my chest ache sometimes.

“This is really the only shop in town to get good supplies. Be nice.”

Be nice?

His comment rubs me wrong, but I ignore it. Not speaking to him has worked so far since we had our fight. I climb out of the truck and follow him into the shop. It’s filled with more supplies than I could ever need. I go from angry to delighted within seconds. Rushing over to a shelf, I marvel at

fancy metal hooks in wrapping with pictures of fish on them. I may not be able to read, but I know what they are. I've seen Reed fishing plenty of times to know. I'm definitely getting some of these.

I grab a handful and shove them in my pocket.

"Whoa," Atticus says. "You can't just steal them. I need to pay for them. Just put everything you want over there on the counter."

I follow where he's pointing and discover a woman staring at me curiously. She's pregnant like Devon. It only makes me hurt more knowing I won't be able to have Atticus as a husband and carry his children. I look away from the woman and start gathering all sorts of tools I think I might need. There's a pack that resembles Atticus's, so I grab it too. The more stuff I accumulate, the more I think I'll need two packs. I grab an extra just in case. I bet I could strap it to Blind Bear. He's a big dog and could probably handle the pack better than me. I'm just feeling some blankets when I hear giggling.

Snapping my attention over to the woman, I discover that Atticus is leaned against the counter speaking to her. No longer interested in my supply gathering. I watch the way they interact. As friends. But...she stares at him in a wistful way. As though she misses him.

I stalk around some shelves in the middle of the shop, silently getting closer. I'm good at sneaking up on animals. They never knew what hit them. I step to the side and she catches me.

"Hey, Eve, is it? I'm Cassandra. Nice to meet you, sweetheart. Atticus says he's looking after you for a friend. Glad to have you here and let me know if you need help finding anything."

Cassandra.

I take a threatening step toward her, but Atticus blocks me.

"Don't," he growls, no room for argument. "I know what's going on in that little fox brain of yours and you need to quit right now. I'll buy this shit. Go sit in the truck."

I shove at his chest, but the big bear doesn't move.

"Now, Eve."

I'm embarrassed that he chooses her over me. Is she pregnant with his child? Is that why he doesn't want me? With hot tears in my eyes, I storm outside. The door barely closes behind me when I lose my footing on the ice and fall hard on my bottom. My wrist turns at an awkward angle,

making a sharp pain shoot up my arm. The sob I'd been trying to hold in rips from me.

The door flies open and boots crunch behind me.

"Eve, baby, are you okay?" Atticus kneels beside me, his palm running over my head, stroking me.

"I fell."

"I see that."

Another sob chokes past my lips.

"Hey," he coos. "Are you hurt?"

I nod, swiping at my tears with my good hand. "I twisted my wrist."

His brows furrow with concern. "Let me get you in the truck and after I pay for that stuff, we'll take a look at it."

I let out a squeak of shock when he scoops me in his arms. He's warm and strong and safe. I nuzzle my face against his scruffy beard and inhale his scent. When my lips press to his jaw, he doesn't get onto me for it.

He sets me inside the truck and then leans over to start it. Once heat is flooding inside, he gives me a chaste kiss on my cheek.

"I'll be right back."

Ten minutes later, he tosses the bags in the back and climbs into the truck. He reaches over and takes my hand.

"This one?"

It doesn't hurt like it did when I first fell. Just sore. Maybe bruised. I want his hands on me, so I simply nod.

Gently, he pulls off my glove and tugs my coat sleeve back. "A little swollen." His hands are warm as he rotates my wrist. "Does it hurt when I move it like this?"

"No."

"Good," he rushes out. "I don't think it's broken. You better rest it a few days, though, just in case."

"I have to go home."

"Not until that heals." His tone brooks no argument.

I scowl, feigning anger, but my heart squeezes inside my chest. When he's being sweet and attentive, I don't mind spending time with him. It's when he ignores me and keeps his distance that I nearly die.

Once we're back on the road, I look over at him.

"She misses you," I tell him bitterly.

“Who? Cassandra?” He lets out a heavy sigh. “We were just friends. We’re nothing now. She’s pregnant and with a guy I went to high school with.”

Relief floods through me. I’m glad she can’t have him. She doesn’t deserve him. He’s mine.

“I thought you were going to stab her right there in the store,” he says with a chuckle.

“I thought about it.”

“You’re something else, Eve.”

“Just protecting what’s mine.”

“I’m not...I don’t need protecting...never mind.”

When we finally make it home, he’s once again being distant Atticus. I want to stab *him* now. Once he pulls up beside the house, I unbuckle and scoot over to him. His eyes widen when I straddle his lap to sit and face him.

“Eve,” he warns.

“I just wanted to look at you.”

“And it’s not appropriate.”

“Says who?”

“Says the State of Alaska.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “They’re not here, though.”

His lips press into a line. My mouth waters to kiss him. I lean forward and capture his lips with mine. He’s stiff at first, but then gives me the tiniest peck back. It makes me detonate. I slide my fingers into his long hair and tug on the golden locks. His mouth parts at the pain, granting me access. I kiss him hard and probing as I grind against his cock that’s now hard as stone. His hands find my hips and for a moment I’m afraid he’ll pull me off him. Instead, he digs his fingers in, returning my passionate kiss.

I want to devour him.

Mark and claim him.

Keep him.

Moaning against his soft lips, I use his body, seeking friction for the part of me that aches for him. When my nub rubs along his length, I let out a needy whimper.

“Fuck, Eve,” he growls. “You really are a temptation.”

His words are cold water drenched on me. I freeze and jerk away from him.

“What?” he demands. “Are you okay?”

I shudder when he grips my thighs. “H-He said that to me.”

His gaze darkens. “Who?”

“Papa.”

I’m yanked to him in a big hug. I claw at his coat, burying my face against his hot neck.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, stroking his fingers through my hair. “I didn’t know.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

atticus

I'm losing it.

Completely fucking losing it.

When she was sitting in my lap, grinding on my dick, I lost all sense of reality. But the moment I said something that triggered her, we were brought back to our current situation. The one where I'm too old for her and she's just a kid. We since gathered her supplies and brought them inside. Watching her pack away the stuff is gutting at me.

I don't want her to leave.

She's so small and tiny. No match against the harsh wilderness.

But she's fierce and has claws. Her spine is made of steel and her heart is an inferno.

Eve belongs out there.

"What do you want to have for dinner?" I ask, unable to tear my gaze away from her.

She's squatted in the middle of the living room with her blind dog sprawled out beside her as she unzips hidden places on her backpack.

"Eve..."

Her head snaps my way and she frowns. "Squirrel."

I roll my eyes. "I was thinking pancakes."

Despite her mood, she smiles. Brilliant. Beautiful. Soul consuming. "I love syrup."

And I love you.

"I know. I could teach you how to make pancakes. Over the fire."

Her brows lift. "I could make them at home?"

"Yeah, little fox."

She abandons her task and throws herself into my arms. "Thank you."
Greedy, I wrap my arms around her. "Of course."
Neither of us lets go.
I just hold her until her stomach growls.



"You're shivering," I point out.

Her teeth chatter, but she shakes her head. "I'm not."

"Liar."

I love how her smile seems brighter despite it being dark outside. The flames reflect on her pale face, making her eyes dance with delight. We're both bundled up against the cold, but I'm hot on the inside. Every time she licks syrup off her lip, it drives me insane.

"What if you stayed for a little while?" My words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"My hand?"

"No," I utter, scooting closer to her on the log. "What if you stayed because I want you to?"

Her brows crash together. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want me to stay?"

"Because the very idea of letting you go out there alone kills me. I don't want to lose you."

She tilts her head up and bats her long lashes at me. So fucking pretty. Snow dusts her cheeks and hair. I run my hand over her cold hair and then I lean forward rather than backing away. My lips press to hers softly. And I don't pull away after that. No, like the stupid fucker I am, I swipe my tongue out, tasting her bottom lip.

Syrup.

She tastes sweet and addictive.

I groan, overcome with the urge to devour her. Her mouth parts, allowing me access. I kiss this sixteen-year-old girl because I fucking love

her. And that's so incredibly twisted that I can't wrap my head around it. It's wrong, but nothing about being with her feels anything but right.

She squeals when I grab her hips and hoist her into my lap. Her legs spread and she straddles me. Like before, in my truck, she uses my body to bring pleasure to herself. It's fucking hot as hell.

I tried to be good.

I really did.

But in the cover of night and the heat of the fire licking at us, I feel wild and free. Out here, I'm able to touch her without guilt or repercussion. My hand slides under her coat and she yelps when my icy fingers skim up her bare spine under her shirt. She rubs her fingers through my beard and sucks on my tongue, making my dick jolt in response. I push my hand down the back of her pants, desperate to touch her wherever I can. A moan rattles from her when I grab her ass hard. Her jeans are just tight enough that I can't get to her everywhere I want. I reach under her coat, undoing the button and unzipping her jeans. When they fall slack, I slide my longest finger down her ass crack, brushing against her hole, before seeking out her pussy that's already sticky with want for me.

"Fuck, Eve. You're already so wet." She whimpers when I push my finger inside her tight depths. "This pussy is maddening. I can't ever stop thinking about it."

Her hips rock against me, no longer interested in my dick, but the way I finger her. The angle sucks, so I abandon ship to access her from the front. She whines in protest when I pull my hand out but then moans when I find my way into her panties between us. I rub at her clit, loving the breathy mewls crawling up her throat.

"You like your clit touched, hmmm, babe?"

She nods, kissing me hard as she lets me rub her. I tease her until she's nearly on the edge and then I work my fingers through her wetness back into her cunt. Slurping noises can be heard as I fingerfuck her. When I push a second finger into her, she squirms.

"My cock's bigger than my fingers," I warn.

"I want it."

My dick jumps in my jeans. She might not want it, though. I'd probably destroy her tight little pussy. I squeeze another finger inside her heat, loving the scream that escapes her and echoes through the trees.

"If that hurts, then you can't take my big dick." I nip at her lip.

“I can take it.”

I fuck her roughly with three fingers because the angle is awkward, but she likes it based on the way she rotates her hips. My middle finger brushes against her G-spot. Her pussy clenches around me in response. With new determination, I massage that spot until her body is trembling so wildly I think she’s having a seizure. Warmth gushes over my fingers as her cunt tries to milk my fingers like it’s a dick.

Holy shit, she’s perfect.

“Eve,” I growl, pulling my hand out of her pants. “What I want is so not okay.”

“I want it too. Put your cock in me.”

“You’re so fucking blunt.” I stand with her in my arms. “I’m not doing it out here.” With those words, I stalk inside with her, her blind dog on our heels.

I carry her inside the cabin and into the bedroom. The moment I stand her on her feet, we start ripping off clothes. She’s the first one naked and I get a hot view of her ass as she prances over to the bed. I remove my boxers and then prowl after her.

I pounce on her, pinning her with my naked body, and seal my mouth to hers in an owning kiss. Mine. She’s mine. I know it’s not fucking okay. But no one has to know. It can be our secret. I devour every inch of skin I can get my lips on. My mouth marks up her pale neck, making my dick seep with need knowing I’ll get to stare at these marks later.

“Atticus,” she breathes. “I need you.”

I need you too, baby.

Gripping my criminal dick, I rub it through her juices on her cunt. I press the crown into her slowly. Achingly slow. Her tight body stretches—just barely—to accommodate me. Nails dig into my shoulder, making me pause.

“You okay?” I rumble. The restraint it takes not to buck the rest of the way into her is incredible.

She digs her heels into my ass and lifts her hips up, forcing my dick the rest of the way in. Hot. Wet. Tight. I’m overwhelmed by the pleasure of being inside her that I almost can’t move. Stalling for a moment so I don’t blow my load, I kiss her hard. My palm strokes roughly down her cheek and down her throat. I pin her gently to the bed. Cage my little animal and keep her for myself. Pulling away from our kiss, I watch her feral brown

eyes gleam. I give her neck a little squeeze, letting her know she's mine and doesn't get to leave me. She must understand my unspoken words because she smiles.

I buck into her hard, making her scream. I attack her lips with mine. Gentle and soft doesn't work for someone like her. She's wild and I want to be wild with her. We bite and suck and fuck. I'm getting close to nutting when I remember I don't have condoms. I don't want to finish on her stomach, but it's better than knocking her up.

The thought of Eve filled with my kid and unable to leave my side is a maddening thought. I could claim her right now. Keep her forever.

I may be fucking a teenager, but I'm not an asshole.

With a groan as my nuts release my seed, I reluctantly pull out my spurting dick and splatter her pretty red pussy with my cum. Then, I rub the cum with my fingers all over her clit roughly until she screams out my name in pleasure. The moment she's found her release, I fall on top of her, pinning her small body with mine.

Small.

Like a child.

Fuck.

Regret hits me right in the stomach, yet I don't move.

Why?

Because she's running her fingers through my hair and humming "Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin. Of course I don't fucking move. I'm transfixed by her. Obsessed. Completely out of control. I love her and it's insane. It's against the law. It's wrong.

Yet my dick is already hardening at the thought of having her again.

Hard as stone pressed against her thigh, still wet from her juices. It would be easy to... One small adjustment and my dick is sucked back into her warmth. It feels right being inside her. Like we fucking belong together.

This time, we make love slower. Calmer. More touches. More kisses. I catalogue every whimper and moan. She scratches her fingers along my flesh, marking me as hers. And when I come, I pull out.

Of course I pull out.

Any sane motherfucker would.

But not before feeling that first squeeze of her pussy as my cock jolts with a burst of hot, claiming cum. I take that moment and save it as

something I'll remember forever. The moment I made her mine for one second.

Tomorrow I'll get condoms.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow.



I watch her as she sleeps.

Peaceful and serene. Beautiful.

Her dark hair is messy and half covering her face. Gently, I swipe it away so I can look at her up close, unobstructed.

Last night, I fucked her.

Twice.

And then I washed her in the shower before taking her to bed with me. Now that the line has been crossed, I have no interest in going back. We've done the crime and now I just have to figure out how to keep from doing the time.

I run my fingertip down her spine, dragging the covers down with it, and then along her ass crack. Her cute little ass has put some meat on it and I love it. My dick is hard as stone, but I don't dare try to fuck her again. After the savage fucking last night, she's no doubt sore as hell. I squeeze her ass before seeking out the warmth of her pussy with my finger.

I play with her clit enough to get her to wake up. It's swollen and needy, throbbing with blood. Makes me want to bite her there.

"Morning," I say, my words raspy from sleep. I continue to strum her clit in a teasing way.

"Morning." Her voice is breathy. "Your manhood is hard."

I chuckle. "Cock. Manhood sounds cheesy as fuck."

Her smile lights up my soul. She reaches toward me and grips my dick. As I play with her, she strokes me with expert knowledge. I wonder if she learned how to do that with her brothers or her father. If they were alive, I'd kill them myself.

Pushing those horrible thoughts away, I focus on bringing her pleasure.

“Atticus,” she murmurs. “I want you inside me.”

How will I ever tell this girl no about anything?

Answer is, I won’t.

“You’re dry,” I growl. “Too sore.”

“Make me wet.”

The challenge in her tone is my undoing. I scoot down the bed and mimic her position between her spread legs. She makes a choking sound when I spread her cheeks and lick whatever sensitive flesh I can find. I want my tongue in every crevice of her. I want to own her everywhere. My tongue circles her asshole and teases it for a bit before finding her swollen pussy. I suck on her lips and run my tongue along her slit, seeking out her musky taste. Each passing second, she gets wetter for me. Needier. Desperate to quench my thirst for her. When I’m sure I have her good and wet, I spit on my hand before stroking my dick.

“Ready?” I ask as I crawl up her small body.

“Mmmhmm.”

I run the tip of my dick down her ass crack, teasing her asshole and pressing slightly against it. I want inside every one of her holes. I’m fucking crazed for her now and I don’t know what to do about it except give in. She cries out when I push in the crown. As much as I want in here too, we need lube for that. Reluctantly, I pull my mushroom head from her tiny asshole and then tease her juicy cunt. Her fingers fist the blankets when I push all the way into her with one hard thrust.

Heaven.

Being inside her is fucking heaven.

I’m crazy for her and I don’t fucking care what a prick that makes me. Pressing my hands down over her wrists, I spike my hips forward, reveling in her moan. Her body is slippery and inviting. An accomplice to my crime. I squeeze her wrists to the point she yelps, which makes my dick thump inside her.

Fuck, I’m losing control.

I want to pin her down and fuck her forever. Fill her up and breed her. Keep her, goddammit.

“You like this, little girl?” I groan, my teeth nipping at her ear.

She nods. “More.”

I shove her arms up under the pillows, my grip still tight, as I flex my hips hard. Over and over. Our bodies make a slick slapping sound that

fucking sings to me. I nip her ear, her throat, her shoulder. I try to bruise her with my teeth because she's mine and I need to see it whenever I look at her. Each time I bite her, she clenches around my dick. Eve's my wild fucking animal. Of course she loves this shit.

Harder and harder.

I pull out almost all the way and slam back into her, making her scream. The entire bed shakes and the dog whimpers nearby. I don't fucking care. We can break the bed for all I care. I'll buy a new one. Bringing her wrists together, I take the two tiny things in my large hand and rake my fingertips roughly down her body to her hip with my other. Then, I dive my hand beneath her, seeking her clit. I know when I have it because she cries out.

"Good girl," I growl. "I'm going to make you scream because you're mine. My girl. My sweet fucking teenage wild girl with a tight little pussy that was made for my cock."

My dirty talk sets her off because she explodes like a bomb. I pinch at her clit, raggedly thrusting against her until I find my own release. My nuts seize up and I spill. Hot and furious. Fuck. I slip out, my dick still spurting, and press against her tight asshole, just barely feeding the puckered hole the rest of my cum.

Holy shit.

I fall onto the bed, yanking her to me so I can comfort her and stroke her hair. "I'm sorry. I just want to...I don't fucking know. Consume you. Eat you alive. What are you doing to me, baby?"

She lifts her head, her plump pink lips curling into a smile. "Being a good wife."

I freeze.

Wife.

She's still so fucked in the head over that shit.

And because I'm a sick sonofabitch, I roll her over and kiss her to show her just how much I like that answer.

Wife.

Out here, in my cabin, we can fucking pretend.

We're not hurting anybody.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

eve

I pace around the cabin, unsettled. Atticus is sitting in his chair reading, but I can't sit still. Blind Bear sits in the corner, gnawing on a bone he found in the woods, happy as can be. I wish I could relax.

"Come here."

The command is one I feel down to my toes that have been curling several times a day thanks to Atticus. He consumes me. Once he was freed from his mental cage, he's been on me like my dog with his bone.

I love it.

I love him.

My feet take me over to his chair. He pulls me into his lap, abandoning his book on the table. Against his warm body, I feel calm again.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know."

"Is it me? Us?" Guilt tinges his tone and I hate that. We've been fucking as he calls it for weeks now.

"No."

"Then what?"

I nuzzle my nose along his scruffy jaw, inhaling him. My tongue flicks out and I lick his Adam's apple, loving his salty taste on my tongue. He laughs, making it bob.

"You're such a little weirdo."

"I don't know what a weirdo is."

"It's you, Eve. Licking me and marking me. Very cute, though."

I sit up, my eyebrow hiked up. "You're a weirdo because"—I lift my shirt to reveal my breasts that wear purple bruises from his mouth—"you do

it too.” I let the shirt fall back down and his green eyes glimmer in that predatory way that makes my heart beat faster.

His finger trails along my throat. “I like these marks on you. They’re pretty.”

I melt a little at his words. He sometimes says soft, sweet things that make my head spin. I’m mesmerized by him.

Toying with a strand of his golden hair, I stare at his handsome face. He keeps his hair down for me, though he puts it in his “man bun” when we go to town. I love it when it’s free and I can run my fingers through the silky tresses.

“Something’s bothering you,” he murmurs, his brows crashing together.

I massage the wrinkle there with my thumb. “No.”

He rolls his eyes. “Nice try.”

“I just...I want something, but I don’t know how to ask for it.”

At this, he tenses. “Anything, babe. Tell me what you want and I’ll go buy it for you right now.”

Atticus is a good husband.

I pick up the book that has words on it I can’t understand. “I want to know how to read. Mother tried when I was a child, but I was more interested in playing with Esther’s hair or chasing butterflies. I loved to look at my reflection in the water and make silly faces or pick flowers for my mother. All her lessons were for nothing. I didn’t care then. I care now.”

He pulls the book from my hand and sets it back down before squeezing my thigh. “You want to go to school?”

I cock my head to the side. “I don’t know school.”

“It’s a place where you go with other kids to learn—”

“No.” I lean forward and kiss his mouth. “My husband.”

He darts his attention away and clears his throat. “Fine. No school. But I can’t teach you with George Orwell’s *1984*. If you don’t know any letters or words, then we need to dial it back to basic. I can pick up some learning books for children.” He winces at his words.

“Yes. I want the books. Can we go now?”

He chuckles, the tension leaving his body. “Yeah. You’re full of energy. I knew buying you Mountain Dew was a bad idea.”

I stick my tongue out at him like I’ve seen them do on television when they don’t like what someone’s said. This makes him laugh and then he digs his fingers into my ribs. Loud laughter rips from my throat as I thrash. It’s

too much. Too intense. Why am I laughing so hard? Tears roll down my cheeks as I giggle. He pulls me to him, stroking my hair.

“I love that sound, baby. So beautiful.”

He’s loving me just the way I like, and if I didn’t already have this in my head, I’d strip down for him so he could touch me everywhere. But this is important to me. Reading. I want to know what the words say on television. I want to know what Joey’s T-shirts say or what the words are that sometimes blink on the screen before and after the show.

“Come on,” he says, slapping my thigh. “Let’s go before I decide to spend the night making you laugh with my nose buried between your legs.”



I love the grocery store.

It’s my favorite place ever.

So. Many. Things.

There are more jars of peanut butter than I can count!

Atticus cuts me off at five jars, but I toss in another one when he’s not looking. My husband is patient as we go up and down each aisle, shopping as he calls it. Shopping is wonderful. A few people shoot us curious stares. I notice several women looking at Atticus as though he’s a jar of peanut butter. It makes me want to pull my knife out and tell them to walk away before I make them.

They’re all so pretty.

Like Rachel and Phoebe and Monica.

And I’m...

My lips aren’t shiny like theirs and my eyelids don’t sparkle. I don’t wear dresses that show my legs. Judith sent one. I tried it on once, but it felt too open. Now, I wonder if open is a good thing. Is that so your husband can shove it up your hips and put his cock inside you when the need arises?

Maybe I could wear dresses if that’s their purpose.

A woman with blond hair walks by, her dress swishing. I realize she doesn’t have a husband. She’s alone. And keeps sneaking looks at mine.

Does she think...that he would...

No.

Rage, hot and violent surges through me.

"Stop looking at my husband or I'll make you blind like my dog," I hiss at her.

"Eve!" Atticus barks, grabbing my bicep and pulling me back.

"Oh," the woman croaks. "I'm so sorry. I thought she was your daughter."

She rushes off toward the end of the aisle. I relax the moment she turns.

"What the fuck was that?" he demands, turning me to face him.

"She thought she could take my husband!" I yell, jerking from his grip.

He stares at me with wide, horrified eyes. That's what I thought. She had no right!

"Listen," he snarls, stepping close enough that our chests touch. "You can't blab that shit out in public." He strokes back a tendril of my hair, tucking it behind my ear. "You know those traps you make for the rabbits?"

I nod, frowning.

"They make those for men. But made of metal as strong as your knife blade. If they know, they'll tell the police I'm fucking you, and then they'll put me behind those bars. I'll stay there, baby. Do you understand?"

Realization dawns on me. "They'll take you away from me? Why?" I choke back my tears, hating how the loneliness floods inside my chest cavity.

"Because..." He sighs and drops a quick kiss to my forehead. "Because they won't understand what we have. You and me, baby, it's not right."

"So I'm supposed to pretend you're not my husband when we're around these monsters?" I practically shriek at him, hot tears rolling down my cheeks.

His nostrils flare and he casts a look over his shoulder. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

"But the women will take you from me," I whisper. "If they don't know, they'll think you could be theirs."

He pulls me to him for a hard hug. "No one is taking me from you. As long as we play this right in public. Please. Do this one thing for me, baby. I don't ask for much."

"Yes," I mutter, my voice quivering. "I don't want to, but I will to keep you safe."

"Thank you."

“But if a woman tries to take you, I’ll cut her throat.”

He laughs as he steps back. “My violent little fox. What would I ever do without you here to protect me?” His green eyes dance with amusement.

Get mauled by hordes of females in the peanut butter aisle apparently.

“Fuckin’ hell. If it ain’t little Atticus.”

We both snap our gazes in the direction of an older man and a younger one. I step close to Atticus for protection. I don’t know them and they’re both larger than me, unlike the women. I’m not sure I could take two at once.

There’s something familiar about them both.

Green eyes. Green eyes. Green eyes.

“Will,” Atticus says, his voice tight. “Evan. How the hell are you guys?”

The older one hugs Atticus and then Atticus playfully hits the younger one in the stomach. The younger one stares at me, eyes wide and mouth slightly parted.

“Look away,” I warn, my hand going around the hilt of my knife in my pocket.

The younger man snaps his mouth shut and darts a confused look toward the older one. His cheeks blaze red.

“Who’s this?” the older one says, no longer playful. He regards me with suspicious eyes.

“Will, meet Eve. Eve, meet my older brother Will. This is his son Evan.” Atticus gives me a look that begs for me to keep quiet. “Will is a policeman.”

Police.

I remember the term from earlier.

If he knows we’re fucking, they’ll take my husband away.

“Is she some long lost kid we didn’t know about?” Will asks, his eyes assessing me.

“Nah, she’s my friend Reed’s daughter,” Atticus lies. “I’m looking after her for him.”

Will jerks his head his brother’s way. “Is that so?”

Atticus, always so confident, shifts under his brother’s hard stare.

“Can I talk to you for a sec?” Will asks, drawing Atticus away by his elbow.

I'm left with the wandering eyes boy. He stares at the ground, his face bright red. I watch him in case he makes any sudden moves.

"You like peanut butter, huh?" he asks, gesturing to the basket.

I flinch at the movement. "Yes."

He chances a gaze my way. "You go to school around here?"

"No."

"How old are you?"

I bristle at the line of questioning. I remember his friend Rex said they were seventeen. If I tell him that age, he might think I'm a suitable wife for him. I have a husband! I want to scream it, but I bite on my bottom lip. For Atticus.

"Fourteen," I lie. Sounds far enough from his age maybe he'll go bother another woman. Maybe the one we just saw.

"Wow. Fourteen? Really? No way. You're older than that, right?" He smiles in a shy way. "Pretty, though." He glances over at where his father is talking to Atticus. "Dad would kill me if I messed around with a fourteen-year-old. I turn eighteen soon."

My curiosity gets the better of me. "What happens when you turn eighteen?"

"I become legal." His cheeks redden further. "Messing around with some young girl would get me slapped with statutory rape charges. I'm too pretty for prison." He laughs at his words, but they're not funny at all.

"What if I was eighteen too?" I probe.

He swallows and his eyes widen. "Uh, we could, uh..." He trails off. "Like date and stuff. I could take you out. It would be okay."

My mind spins. I should have told Atticus eighteen instead of sixteen. That will fix everything.

"I'm really eighteen," I lie. I force a smile.

"Oh," he squeaks out. "I, uh, okay. Sure. So you lied to me about your age so I wouldn't ask you out?"

I nod. I'm not going anywhere with him.

He laughs. "I understand. You probably have some hot boyfriend back home, huh?"

"Husband," I correct him.

"Wait...what?"

"I have a husband and—"

“Eve,” Atticus says sharply, cutting me off. “I was just telling the guys we’d catch up with them another time. You ready?”

We’ve only gone through a few aisles. No way am I ready to go. He must sense my words before I say them because he gives me a firm shake of his head.

“Fine,” I snap, throwing my hands up in the air just like Rachel does it.

Will laughs, Evan looks at his feet, and Atticus glares.

“Typical teenager,” Will says under his breath.

“Hey now,” Evan grumbles, playfully hitting his father. “I resent that.”

They walk off in the other direction and Atticus gives me a warning glare.

“I don’t like your brother.” I lift my chin, daring him to challenge me.

“That makes two of us.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

atticus

Holy shit.

That was a close one.

And I don't even know if I avoided it. My brother is a hound dog. Once he gets a sniff of something sketchy, he hunts it down and then dismantles it like a bomb. When he pulled me aside, he drilled me with questions. I lied through my fucking teeth.

Every time I looked at Eve, I thought how much closer to Evan's age she looked than mine. It was glaringly obvious. And, fuck, if she didn't have hickeys all over her neck. Of course Will asked about those too. I lied and said some boy was coming by the house for her.

We need to get the hell out of here.

The cashier takes forever, but eventually we get the truck loaded. It's dark out and snowing again. Before she can climb back into the truck, I grab her hips with my hands and pin her ass to the truck.

"That was bad," I growl, resting my forehead to hers. "My brother...he just doesn't know when to quit."

"I should have stabbed him."

I laugh, kissing her forehead. "Yeah, you should have. Kidding. He's my brother. We can't kill him. I'm just saying he won't let this go. I lied to him about you."

She tilts her head up. "Tell him I'm eighteen." With her wide brown eyes fixed on me and her plump lips pouted out, she makes me crazy with need.

"But you're not eighteen, are you?"

She shakes her head.

“Maybe we should get out of town for a little while.” I steal a kiss.
“What do you think?”

“Are there prisons there?”

My smile becomes wicked. “Not in the wild. We’ll go visit Reed and Devon. Stay for a few weeks.”

“The thought of seeing them isn’t as frightening as it once was. I think I’m getting used to people now,” she says absently. “Maybe Devon will sing to me.”

“But she sings so horribly,” I joke.

Eve stands on her toes and kisses me in a possessive way. It makes me wonder if she saw one of those women again. The thought has me pulling away from our kiss. Making out with my teenage girlfriend slash wife in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly where my cop brother may or may not be loitering still is a bad idea.

“Let’s roll.”

The drive back home is quiet. Eve is deep in thought. When I finally pull up beside the house, she unbuckles her seat belt and climbs into my lap.

“Yes.”

“Yes, you want to visit?”

She nods. “It’ll keep you safe.”

So protective, my little fox.

“I want to keep you safe too. You wouldn’t like it if they took me away. They’d want to put you somewhere that I can guarantee you would hate.”

“They could try,” she snarls, pulling out her knife.

I take the knife away and fold it back up before sticking it in her pocket.
“You can’t shank everyone.”

“If they try to keep me from my husband, I will.”

I close my eyes. I really should have stopped this husband shit. But now we’re two weeks into me allowing it to happen. Because behind closed doors, I get off on it. I love the possessive feeling it evokes in me.

In public...

It’s embarrassing.

Not because of her. Eve is fucking perfect.

Because of me. I’m a grown ass man. Almost forty, for fuck’s sake. People will see me as a predator. They don’t understand us.

“Be a good little wife and take my cock out,” I murmur, squeezing her thigh. We’re home, so our little game is good here.

Her eyes flash with satisfaction that makes my dick hard as stone. She makes quick work of pulling me out. Her small hand wraps around my thickness and strokes me with expert ease.

“Fuck,” I hiss. “You’re so fucking good at that.”

She works me up and down with her dry hand. I want wetness and heat. I want her.

“Take off your clothes.” My words are raspy and harsh.

Within seconds, she’s ripped away all of her clothes. My tiny, naked *wife* rubs her pussy up and down along my shaft, her needy juices coating me.

“Sit on it, baby. Fuck me.”

Her hand grips my wet dick to guide me into her tight body. We both hiss. I buck my hips up, driving the rest of the way in.

“Touch my clit,” she tells me in that bossy tone of hers.

At least we’ve graduated from nub to clit. I obey my sweet woman and rub at the sensitive bundle of nerves with my thumb. With my eyes on hers, I push my middle finger between her fat lips.

“Suck.”

Her eyes grow hooded as she face fucks my finger the same way she fucks my cock. Once it’s good and wet, I slip it out, letting a string of slobber drip down her chin. I lick up her sweet taste, my tongue tangling with hers, as I locate her ass blindly. My slick finger runs along her crack until I find the bud I’m looking for. I massage the tender muscle until she’s whining with need. Slowly, I push inside her asshole with my finger, loving the way both holes clench in response.

“I’m going to put my dick here one day,” I tell her. I push as deep as I can go. “All the way in there.”

She bobs up and down my cock, her ass clenching each time. When her head tilts back, I attack her pretty throat with my teeth and tongue. I suck her neck, uncaring that I’m leaving more marks. I love the way they look on her.

With my finger in her ass, my cock stuffed in her pussy, and my thumb on her clit, she unravels quickly. Her pussy leaks with her arousal, signifying her upcoming release. The moment she comes, her entire body jolts and tightens as a scream crawls up her throat. She’s hot as fuck when

she goes wild for me. Her fingers yank at my hair as she rides her orgasm out.

“Oh fuck,” I grunt against her mouth.

Pull out. Pull out. Pull out.

My balls tighten and I bite her neck. She claws at my shoulders, still trembling. Cum shoots into her needy body, spurt after heavy spurt. I fill up my wife and it feels fucking amazing. No guilt washes over me because claiming her this way takes precedence over everything.

“I might get you pregnant,” I tell her, my words hot against her flesh.

“Good husband.”

Fuck if that doesn’t make me want to do it again the moment my dick hardens back up, consequences be damned.



Domestic bliss looks good on Eve.

With each passing day, I realize I’ll never be able to let her go. Planning a visit to see Reed and Devon is a good idea. We need to get away. Maybe not be so strained all the time hiding our true feelings. Reed of all fucking people won’t judge. He has every right to considering I judged the hell out of him over the fact he fucked his daughter.

“Smelly dog, smelly dog, what are they feeding you?” Eve sings from the dresser, sounding very much like Phoebe from *Friends*, as she folds clothes in a basket.

Blind Bear rolls over on his back and lets out another doggie fart. Enough bacon for that big boy. His bowels can’t handle it.

“Gross. Send him to the woods.”

She finishes putting her clean panties in the top drawer and tosses the laundry basket in the corner. “How about I send *you* to the woods instead?”

Her challenge gets my dick hard.

“You’re awfully sassy lately.” I stand from the bed and prowl over to her. “Maybe I ought to spank you.”

“With a switch?” she winces, her dark eyes growing stormy.

“Not like whoever the fuck beat you into submission before,” I growl. “I’m talking a good ol’ hand to the ass kind of spanking. Knowing you, your little pussy would get so wet over it. You’re a very naughty girl, Eve.”

Her smile grows wicked. “Can I spank you back?”

“Fuck. You’re a little sadist, you know that?”

She hooks her thumbs into her yoga pants when something shatters. I shove her behind me and rush for my Glock. The dog tears out of the bedroom toward the sound.

“Stay back,” I bark at her as I stalk down the hallway and into the living room.

Cold wind blows in through the kitchen window. A rock sits on the floor and the basket of fruit that was on the table is gone.

What the fuck?

Bears?

I stuff my feet into my boots and grab my coat before walking outside. Blind Bear runs out into the snow sniffing. What I see stops me in my tracks.

Shoe prints in the snow on the porch.

Large. Male if I had to guess. Human.

I squint against the darkness but make out nothing.

“Who’s there?” I call out.

Silence.

No cars. No bikes. No anything.

Just a trail of footprints going into the woods.

“BB,” I call out and then whistle. “Get back in the house.”

After a few minutes of nothing, Blind Bear goes back inside and I follow him. Eve wears a nervous expression I don’t see from her too often.

“Bear?”

“Nah,” I grit out. “Human.”

She eyes the window letting in cold air. “He wanted fruit?”

I hope that’s all he fucking wanted.

“Probably just hungry,” I assure her. “A drifter. He’ll be gone before morning.”

“What if he comes back?”

I grip her jaw and press a kiss to her supple mouth. “I’ll shoot first and ask questions later.”

We may be playing pretend about this husband and wife shit, but my heart thinks it's real and that's all that matters.

If anyone touches my wife, it'll be the last thing they do.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

eve

Atticus borrowed a covered trailer from his dad because in his rush to get me back to town for medical help, he left his at Reed's. It's been a couple of days since the man stole our fruit and I can't help but look over my shoulder every time we bring another box to pack inside the trailer.

"Everything okay?" Atticus asks as he exits the trailer.

"Yes."

"Liar."

I shrug. If I learned anything from Atticus, it's sometimes we have to lie. Like now. I lie because if I tell him my concerns, he'll scour the woods again for hours looking for the man. And when he does that, I feel isolated and alone. I don't like being in his cabin without him. I'd rather keep him by my side.

"Want to go to Muskies for dinner?" His hands grip my hips and he stares at me as if I'm the most lovely thing he's ever seen.

"I might stab Rex. Better not. Oatmeal it is."

He snorts. "You've been watching too much *Friends*. You're becoming quite the comedian."

"We could go into the bedroom and I could pretend to be Rachel and—"

His lips fuse to mine, silencing my words. I smile into his kiss. It's cold outside, but in his arms, I'm warm. Our kiss grows heated quickly. He takes to nipping my lips and then my jaw and then his favorite place...my throat. I groan, loving the way he feels there, and roll my head to give him better access.

"This." He sucks hard. "Is." Another claiming suck. "Mine."

I giggle when he tickles my side and it isn't until Blind Bear barks that we realize a car is driving down the path to his cabin. I'm shoved behind him as he reaches for his Glock at his belt. He always carries it around now.

"Oh fuck."

"What is it? The man?" My fear bleeds into my words.

"No. Worse."

What could be worse?

The car stops and a woman screeches. "You have a phone, son. Use it."

He groans. "My mother."

My heart swells. It makes me miss my own mother tremendously. The blond woman is small like me but has Atticus's face minus the facial hair.

"Hey, Ma," he says, stepping forward to hug her.

She accepts his hug and then moves him aside. "Let me see the girl."

Atticus shoots me a reassuring look. "Ma, meet Eve. Eve, this is my ma, Susan."

The woman starts for me and I nearly trip over my own boots trying to escape.

"A bear got you?" she asks.

I nod and make a clawing motion across my chest.

Sadness gleams in her green eyes that match Atticus's. When she reaches for me, I stumble again in my effort to get away.

"She's skittish around strangers," Atticus says. "Why don't we go inside and have some coffee?"

His mother studies me intently. "I think I'd like that."

I crave to take Atticus's hand, but I know now's not the time. She's his mother, but how do I know she won't turn on him and take him to prison?

As soon as we make it inside, his mother sheds her coat and starts tidying up. I shoot him a questioning look, but he simply shrugs as if this is normal. He steps into the kitchen to start the coffee and I linger by the door with my dog.

"What in the heavens happened to your window?" she gasps, hands on her hips. "Bears?"

"Man," I say harshly as though the word is bitter on my tongue.

His mother blinks at me and then darts her gaze to Atticus.

"Rock through the window. The guy stole our fruit."

"I see," she replies and then turns her scrutinizing glare on me. "Where did you come from, honey?"

I open my mouth, but Atticus answers for me.

“Reed. A friend of mine. It’s his daughter.”

His mother’s lips purse into a line. “Same spiel you gave your brother.”

“It’s not a spiel,” Atticus mutters.

“How old are you?” she asks.

“Sixteen,” he answers as I say, “Eighteen.”

He winces and I stand taller. I don’t know why he’s afraid of this little woman. I’m not. I dig my hand in my coat pocket, checking for my knife. Atticus watches my actions and rolls his eyes.

“Hmmm,” his mother says. “I’ll take that coffee now. Got anything strong to lace it with?”

“No, Ma.”

“Tragedy.” She sits at the table. “So you got a boyfriend, huh? That’s what Will told me. A little too young to be having a boyfriend. Young ladies should be focusing on their future. What college do you plan on attending —”

“Ma,” Atticus snaps. “Enough with the interrogations. Jesus. You’re worse than Will and he’s a damn cop.”

“She’s a mystery and you’re hiding something. I’m your mother. I know these things.”

“There’s nothing to know,” he mutters.

I wince at those words.

“You’re not seeing that Rex boy, are you? I swear Evan can keep better friends than him. I heard he has tattoos.” She shakes her head.

“I have tattoos,” Atticus reminds her.

“Yours are art, my boy. But he’s too young. Do you have any tattoos?” This question is aimed my way. She leans closer, her elbows resting on the table. “What’s that on your neck? Has this boyfriend been putting his hands on you?”

“Ma! Enough!”

Her brow deepens. “You both should come for dinner.”

“We’re leaving in the morning to go see her dad.” Atticus’s tone is final.

“Lovely. Tonight I’m making lasagna. See you at seven.”



“What’s wrong?”

I blink away my tears and stare out the window. I don’t answer him because I don’t think I can speak without crying.

“Baby,” he says, reaching across the cab of his truck for my hand. “What’s wrong?”

I jerk my hand from his. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” he demands, his voice harsh.

“Don’t touch me.”

He lets out a growl of frustration. The truck slams to a stop on the side of a dark road. I can feel his penetrating glare on me.

“Baby, look at me.”

“No.”

“Jesus, woman! Why are you so stubborn?”

I give him a scathing glare. “Fuck you.”

He gapes at me in shock. “Did you just curse at me?” His fingers run through his hair. “You watch too much television.”

“You say that word a million times a day!” I accuse. “Why can’t I say it?”

“Because you’re sixteen goddamn years old!”

“I’m not sixteen,” I snap back.

“Oh, here we go again. You’re eighteen now. I remember. You keep telling everyone that now like it’ll stick. Newsflash, baby, it’s not fucking sticking.”

“Drive.” I face forward, ignoring him.

“You don’t get to order me around, Eve.”

“Drive!”

“Get over here.”

“DRIVE!”

He unbuckles my seat belt, grabs my hips, and hauls me into his lap. I struggle against his hold, but he has no problems settling me with my legs

spread. I'm wearing my only dress—hoping his mother would like it—and feeling especially vulnerable.

“Calm the fuck down and tell me why you're upset.” His green eyes plead with me.

Now that his anger has dispelled and given way to concern, my own fury evaporates like a mist. My shoulders hunch and I tremble.

“You want me to lie to everyone.” Hot tears streak down my cheeks. “I don't want to lie.”

“I don't want to lie either,” he admits, pressing a kiss to my neck. “But we have to.”

“They're your family, though.”

“I wish it were that easy. We need to just make it through tonight. Tomorrow we'll go see Reed and Devon.”

His words don't help the gaping hole in my chest. Nothing feels right. I feel half full. Incomplete. I start to slide off his lap, but his fingers bite into my thighs. Familiar heat burns in my stomach, chasing away the achiness.

“Everything is going to be okay, Eve. Even if we have to wait two years to tell anyone. We'll survive this. I love you too much not to.”

Rather than returning his sentiment, I crash my lips to his. His strong hands grab onto my bottom, squeezing and pulling me against his hard cock between us. Frantically, he works at his belt and then jeans to free his cock. I greedily rub against him. His fingers pull my silky red panties to the side and he taps the tip of his cock against my clit.

“Get on there,” he orders.

I fight a smile as I slide down over his length. When we're together like this, I forget I was even mad at him. Once I'm seated, I go back to kissing him as he bounces me on his cock.

“We gotta be quick, or we'll be late to dinner,” he murmurs, nipping at my bottom lip. He massages my clit in an expert way that has me seeing stars. Over and over again until I lose all sense of reality.

“Oh!” I cry out, losing myself to the pleasure.

His thrusting becomes harder, faster, out of control. Then, he groans as his heat fills me. With his cock still throbbing inside me, he pulls away to look at me.

“I'm going to be hard as fuck through dinner knowing you're full of my cum.” He presses kisses along my jaw to my ear. “*Wife.*”



He gives my thigh a squeeze and flashes me a smile. “Relax. You look like you’re about to take off running.”

I consider it. Now that we’re in his parents’ driveway, I wonder how far I can make it. Probably not far in this impractical dress. What was I thinking?

My panties are wet as Atticus’s cum slowly trickles out of me. It makes me squirm in my seat, wondering if they’ll notice. Then our secret would be out. Would they try and drag him away from me? My palm curls around the hilt of my knife in my pocket. They could try.

The truck door opens and Atticus watches me with narrowed eyes. He takes my hand, helping me out of the big truck. Instead of releasing me, he steals a chaste kiss.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Eve. Trust me, I’d much rather brag to the damn world you’re mine. One day I will. For now, we have to take what we can get and that’s each other. The rest can wait.”

His words cause chaotic fluttering in my belly. “Your cum is leaking out of me.”

“Eve,” he growls, his nostrils flaring as he caresses my cheek. “You can’t say shit like that to me right before we walk in to see my parents.”

I touch him through his jeans. Hard as stone. “It’s the truth. We’re about to have to lie. I just wanted to tell the truth while we still could.”

“Later,” he murmurs, dragging his palm down the side of my neck, “I’m going to pull those silky panties off with my teeth, wrap them around my dick, and jack off all over your sexy little ass.”

I thread my fingers in his hair and kiss him deeply. My heart races in my chest with the need for him to consume me. In the end, he pulls away with a harsh groan as if it physically pains him to do so.

It pains me too.

“Come on,” he says, his voice husky, as he takes my hand.

Together we walk toward his parents’ large home. I lean against his shoulder, stealing what little time we have left before he pretends I’m

nothing to him again. I'm lost in thought when I feel it.

Awareness.

The hairs rising on the back of my neck.

A cold chill down my spine.

I pull my knife out, halting on the snow-covered path. Atticus abruptly pulls his hand from mine and I wonder if he's readying himself to fight too.

"Hey, Dad," Atticus says toward the dark porch.

A giant man appears from the shadows. I stumble back a step. His hair is white and the length is nearly as long as Atticus's. He's bundled up all in black with a cap on his head. His beard is also white, but trimmed short against his face.

"This is Eve." Atticus's voice is tight and it makes me nervous. Is he afraid of his father like I was of mine? "Eve, this is my dad, Abel." His palm finds my back and he gently guides me toward the man.

As soon as his brown eyes come into focus, I tense up. I know this man. The knife in my grip falls to the ground as I shake, a terrified mewl crawling up my throat.

"Hey," Atticus croons. "It's just my father. He's not going to hurt you."

The look on Abel's face says otherwise. Stern. Almost angry. Disgusted. I cringe, hiding behind Atticus's back. My heart stampedes in my chest as fear makes the world around me darken and spin.

I don't feel so well.

The spinning gets worse.

It stops as black bleeds into my vision, stealing me from this moment.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

atticus

Eve just collapses.

Scares the fuck out of me too.

Dad's footsteps thunder as he rushes for us. I scoop my little fox in my arms, panic surging through me.

"She okay?" Dad grunts out, his worried eyes meeting mine.

"She passed out." I storm up the steps. "I think she was freaked the fuck out."

He doesn't say a word, simply follows me into the house that smells like Ma's amazing lasagna. I can hear my brothers and sister teasing each other and Mom nagging at them to quit. Ignoring them all, I carry Eve over to the sofa and set her down.

"Eve," I croon. "Wake up."

She's so pale. In the lamplight, wearing her big coat, she seems so small and fragile. So young. Guilt threatens to gnaw at me, but I don't let it. I promised her we could be together as long as we kept it quiet. Her age is something I have no problems forgetting about when my cock's buried deep inside her.

"I'll get Vic," Dad says, stalking off.

I pull her coat off her and then drape it over her bare legs.

Less than a minute later, my brother and EMT, rushes over to us. He has the same golden blond hair as I do, but he has Dad's brown eyes. Vic has also adopted Will's clean-cut look and has his hair clipped short to his head.

"What happened?" he asks, launching right into first responder mode.

"She got scared, I think, and passed out."

He checks her pulse with his fingers and then gives me a nod. "Pulse is steady. I think she'll wake soon—"

Her brown eyes pop open and like a cornered animal, she hisses. I nudge him out of the way to sit next to her on the sofa.

"You're okay," I assure her, taking her hand. "You fainted."

"What in heaven's name—" Mom starts as she enters the living room with Will, Evan, and Judith in tow.

"Peanut butter crackers, Ma," Vic says. "Grab a Sprite too. Could be low blood sugar. When was the last time she ate?"

I don't remember.

My mind is blank because my worry over her has consumed every thought.

Dad gently touches Vic's shoulder. "Give them some air. Everyone is overwhelming them." He gestures for everyone to leave, but he remains.

Eve's narrowed eyes pin him in place. She trembles as though she fears he might hurt her.

"It's okay, little one," Dad says and then grins at her.

Her head cocks to the side, her gaze fixated on his mouth. "He has teeth."

Dad snorts. "Perceptive, this one."

I squeeze her hand. "He does. How are you feeling?"

Vic returns with a package of crackers and the soda. She loves peanut butter, so she devours all six crackers just as fast as I can hand them to her. When she sips the Sprite, her eyes light up with delight. My girl loves soda.

"Better?" I ask.

She nods and eyes the home with guarded curiosity. I don't let her hand go. Not now. Not when she's frightened out of her mind. With Rex and Evan, she wasn't intimidated. But with both Will and my dad, it's like their size terrifies her. It's strange because I'm about the same size as Will and am nearly as big Dad, yet she's not afraid of me.

Her fingers thread with mine, making my heart rate quicken. I should tug them away, but I can't. She's so broken. They can drag my ass to prison. I'm not letting her hand go.

"Tell me how you know this little one again," Dad says, his voice soft as to not startle her.

I flash her an apologetic look. "My friend Reed's daughter. She was hurt by a bear. I am looking after her until she heals. We're actually headed back

there. I think we'll leave tonight instead of tomorrow. Just have to swing by the house after this to grab her dog and my trailer."

"Hmmm," Dad says.

He and Vic share a look I interpret all too well. A look that says, *He's lying*.

"Hi, Eve," Judith chirps. "You don't know me, but you're wearing one of my old dresses." She grins at Eve. "Looks totally cute on you."

Eve fidgets, but chances a look in my sister's direction. Judith sits on the arm of the couch, giving the rest of us an eye roll.

"You guys just gonna stare at her all night like a bunch of fuckin' creeps?" Judith softens her words with a sassy smile that used to get her ass grounded in high school.

Dad chuckles. "Watch your mouth, girl." Then, he pats my shoulder. "Mind if we talk for a sec?"

Eve's eyes widen. Before I can calm her, Judith inches her way closer. At least Judith knows the whole story—aside from the part that I actually did what she assumed I'd do and fuck Eve—but I'm guessing she'll figure it out on her own.

"Did you like the flashlight?" Judith asks her. "You know the one." She waggles her eyebrows.

"Batteries," Eve chirps.

Judith laughs and then starts chattering about her usual nonsense. I mouth to Eve I'll be right back. Reluctantly, I release her hand and stand to follow my dad out of the room. Vic hovers nearby in case he's needed. Dad pulls me into his study, a worried look on his face.

"You sleeping with the girl?"

"W-What?"

His lips press together in a firm, disappointed way I remember all too well when I was a boy. "You must think I'm nine kinds of stupid, son."

"Dad," I huff out. "I'm not...whatever you're thinking..."

"You seemed close out by the truck."

"She was worried. I was reassuring her."

His eyes narrow, the browns flickering with distrust. "And just now? Holding her hand?"

"You're reading too much into shit," I growl. "You take what Will and Mom say and add to it to create this fantastical shit?"

"Tone it down," he snaps. "I'm just making sure."

“Well, I’m sure. I’m not sleeping with her.” I pin him with a glare. “Why do you even care anyway?” I grumble, irritation fueling my words. “It’s not like you didn’t start dating Mom when you were young. Wasn’t she still in high school when she got pregnant with Will?”

His features darken. “You misunderstand.”

“No,” I challenge. “I understand clearly. There’s always been a code your kids have had to live up to that you and Ma didn’t. Will? Vic? They deal with it. You molded them into perfect pillars of the community.”

“Atticus,” he warns.

I’m done holding this shit in.

“Me? I tried. I disappointed everyone when I didn’t follow Will onto the force. Chose football and couldn’t even cut it at that.” I grit my teeth. “Your boy’s been living off his NFL earnings and hasn’t found a job.”

“Atticus...”

“Want to know why I can’t find one? Because I don’t want to be a fucking cop. I want to be out there.” I wave my hand toward nothing. “Remember when I wanted to be a park ranger and you told me to get my head out of my ass?”

Apparently now’s the time to get all the shit off my chest that’s been festering for the last couple of decades.

Dad’s eyes gleam with fury, but he remains silent, allowing me my rant.

“And Judith...fuck. I should have watched her better.” My voice cracks. “Fuck.”

“That wasn’t your fault. Accidents happen.” His voice is soft and his features have lost their edge.

“She doesn’t fit the mold either, Dad. We’re both fucked up because we can’t make our personalities fit into your and Mom’s perfect world.”

“Are you done with this rant?” Dad asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I guess.” I deflate like a balloon.

“I’ll ask you again. Are you sleeping with the girl?”

“No, Dad. I’m not.” Despite his own love life starting with a teenager, I don’t push it. Those were different times back then. Nowadays, you just can’t get away with that shit. If I give him the truth, it will not fucking set me free. It’ll give me a free ride to the station in the back of my brother’s police cruiser.

“Good,” he breathes out.

“I’m glad you’re pleased.”

He scrubs his palm down his face. “Just...just wait here. I want to show you something.”

As soon as he leaves the office, I head out looking for Eve. The couch is empty when I make my way to the living room. Panic assaults me.

“Bathroom,” Judith says, a knowing grin on her face.

I walk down the hall and rap on the door with my knuckle. “You okay in there?”

Eve opens the door, suspicion in her stare. When she confirms it’s me, she throws her arms around me. I wrap an arm around her waist before walking back into the bathroom and closing the door behind me. I lift her by her waist and set her on the edge of the counter before cradling her cheeks in my palms.

“We can leave,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “They’ll get over it. I’m sorry.”

She darts her eyes away. “We can stay.”

“But you’re scared.”

“No.”

“Eve, baby, don’t lie to me.”

Her head tilts up and she regards me with fire in her eyes. “I’m not scared.”

“Not right now. Ten minutes ago, you passed the fuck out from fear.”

“He has teeth.”

I blink at her in confusion. “So do I. So do you. It’s a thing.”

A knock on the door has me jerking away from her.

“It’s me,” Judith says. “Everyone’s looking for you two. I suggest if you don’t want them making their own conclusion, you get out here.”

“Be right out,” I grunt.

I step back over to Eve and gently grip her throat, my thumb running along her jaw bone. My lips fuse to hers and I kiss her in a protective way that’s filled with vows to take care of her.

“We’ll eat and bail,” I assure her. “Come on, beautiful. Let’s get this over with.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

eve

His family is loud.

Kind of like all the friends when they gather in Monica's apartment. It's chaotic and filled with laughter. A longing burrows its way deep in my chest. I'm beginning to think families are supposed to be this way. On television, here, at Reed and Devon's, it's all the same.

My home was the wrong one.

When my mother was around, I remember our days being happy. My brothers weren't cruel then. There was laughter and love. It all changed when my mother got sick. Everyone grew angry and quick-tempered. She died, but it never went back to the way it was.

They replaced her.

Papa took Esther and forced her into my mother's role. I was confused, but I loved Esther. She sometimes was like a mother to me. I tried to accept what happened as something natural.

But then my brothers got involved.

They never touched my mother, not like they touched Esther. She became something for them to stick their cocks into or beat with their fists. Papa allowed it. Simply looked the other way. And then Ezekiel hurt her for good. Was so rough with her she bled out and died.

I became the woman of the house then.

A shudder wracks through me as I force away horrible memories of them. Papa would whip me on occasion and bed me, but it was my brothers whom I hated so much. They prowled around like starving wolves, just waiting for my father to go hunting or fall asleep. Like I was their dinner, they'd drag me away someplace where they could all take turns pawing at

me. One by one they'd try to breed me like I was some animal meant for carrying their young.

An ache forms in my chest as I remember the blood.

Tears well and roll down my cheeks.

"Eve."

I'm snapped from my inner thoughts as Atticus regards me with furrowed brows. His family all watches me like I don't belong in their home. With his hand on my lower back, his fingers brushing along my bottom over my dress, he guides me into the room with a giant table. Delicious looking foods sit arranged on top, just waiting for us to devour.

"Do you feel faint again?" he asks, pulling a chair out for me to sit.

"No."

"What're you thinking about then?"

"My family."

His features darken. "You don't have to be afraid of them anymore. They're gone."

He sits next to me and brushes a hair behind my ear. I lean into his touch. When I catch his mother's glare on me, I pull away and look down at my lap. Judith takes the seat next to me. His parents sit at each end while his two brothers and nephew sit across from us.

Will, the policeman, sits directly across from me. His penetrating glare burns into me. He reminds me of Ezekiel with his intensity. That thought makes my heart speed up, thumping violently in my chest.

"Well, I think I can speak for the entire family when I say we're glad to have you here, Eve," Judith says, winking at me.

I like Judith. She's nice and funny. Reminds me of a smaller version of Atticus.

The rest of the family mumbles out some sort of agreement. Then, the dinner gets a little loud as everyone starts scooping food onto their plates and passing dishes. Atticus makes my plate and his. I love that he always looks after me. I've just picked up my fork when Will speaks up.

"Reed, you say?"

He's staring at me, but I think he's talking to Atticus.

"Yes." Atticus's voice is clipped.

"Reed Jamison who you sold your extra land to?"

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" Atticus growls. "You couldn't let shit just lie?"

“Language,” their mother huffs.

“Language,” Judith mimics her under her breath. “They totally won’t mind their language. Watch.”

“When you act shady, I have a civic duty—” Will starts.

“To be fucking nosey?” Atticus snaps. “Seriously, man. Back the fuck off.”

“Told you,” Judith says with pride in her voice.

“Atticus,” Abel warns, making the hairs on my arms stand on end.

“Why invite us over if we were just going to be walking into an ambush? The nasty looks are getting old, Ma,” Atticus bites out, giving Susan a pointed look. “And Will, for once in your damn life, stay the fuck out of mine.”

Will’s nostrils flare. “Who is she really? Because when I researched this Reed guy, he has a wife and daughter with blond hair.” He points at me. “Not her.”

“She’s Eve. Still someone I’m looking after,” Atticus growls, clinging to his lie harder than ever.

“How old is she really, man?” Will demands. “Because I’m tired of all the lies. I asked Suma—”

“For fuck’s sake!” Atticus slams his fist down on the table. “Stop!”

Will stands, his face turning red with anger. Vic tries to pull him back into his seat while Evan’s face burns red with embarrassment. Judith whispers that they’re animals and do this sort of thing a lot.

“Suma said you were being inappropriate with the girl,” Will hisses.

Their mother gasps. “Oh my God.”

“Oh shit,” Judith whispers.

“For the tenth goddamn time, I’m not sleeping with her!” Atticus’s words are practically screamed at them.

Each syllable rattles my bones and poisons my blood.

His lies sound so real.

Thank goodness I know the truth.

He loves me.

“Everyone just calm down,” Vic says, finally managing to jerk Will back down into his seat. “Eve, hon, how old are you? We’re all family here. You’re not going to get into trouble and neither will Atticus. We’re just trying to make sense of all this.”

I dart my eyes over to Atticus. I'm not sure what answer he wants me to tell them. He pinches the bridge of his nose, defeated. Will pins me with a glare that dares me to lie. I decide to tell them the truth.

"I'm..."

"Nineteen?"

My head snaps over to Atticus's father, who watches me with interest. I squirm under his stare.

"Yes."

"What?" Atticus snarls, turning his anger on me. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

I wince at his tone. When he reaches for my hand, I jerk it back. Judith gently touches my shoulder and I don't shake away her hand.

"You told me you were sixteen!" Betrayal shines in Atticus's stare and I hate that I've somehow put it there.

I don't remind him it's because he practically force-fed those words into my mouth. I thought that's what he wanted to hear. Then, I realized eighteen was the number he wanted. It was too late then. They were both lies anyway.

"You must be thrilled," Will deadpans. "Now you can fuck—"

"Enough!" Abel booms. "You two boys need to put a goddamn lid on it."

Both Will and Atticus radiate with fury.

"I've already checked with Atticus," Abel tells Will. "He's not having a sexual relationship with her. And that's good. Really good."

"So this is awkward," Evan mutters.

"I think it's delightfully entertaining," Judith disagrees.

"Eve, darlin', what are your parents' names?" Abel studies me as though he can see right into my brain.

"David and Rebekah."

A beat of silence.

Susan drops her fork and gasps. "Abel..."

"I knew it," Abel mutters. "Holy shit."

Abel reaches past Atticus to hand me something. A photograph. As soon as I see it, I recognize it. My parents had one just like it. It was of them when they were children. The one from the photo they never spoke about...

"David and Rebekah are my brother and sister."

Atticus freezes as Abel's words sink in. I'm too busy staring at Abel with new eyes. He has Mother's smile. The eyes are Papa's. While my parents were gaunt, Abel is filled out and muscular. But all the similarities are there.

"You're confused," Atticus whispers to Abel. "Really fucking confused, Dad."

"I'm going to be sick," Susan chokes out before rushing from the table.

Vic follows after with Evan hot on his heels. Will continues to glower at me. Judith has taken to stroking my hair in a soft, reassuring way that makes tears form. It reminds me of Esther.

"Impossible," Atticus growls.

Abel shakes his head. "I saw your parents when they had you," he tells me. "Almost twenty years ago. Your mother was having trouble and they brought her to the hospital. A friend of mine at the hospital called me." He frowns. "You look just as I remember my sister when she was young. They looked so different, though."

They were unclean.

Wild.

Toothless.

Compared to these people, I can see that they would be very different.

"Stop," Atticus pleads.

"Are you..." Will scrubs his palm over his face. "Are you saying the aunt and uncle we never knew..."

"Were fucking," Judith blurts out. "Call a spade a spade, Will."

"That's..." Will trails off.

"Incest." Atticus's hand shakes.

I reach for it and he yanks it back as though I'm diseased.

"The children were a product of incest," Abel agrees. "But they're still our family. I don't know how you happened upon Eve here, but I'm glad you did." He turns his eyes my way. "Do you have any siblings? They had a little girl in tow with them at the time, but I didn't see any others with them. How are David and Rebekah?"

"Everyone's dead," I choke out, my bottom lip trembling.

Atticus stands so quickly, the chair falls back and hits the tile with a loud bang. "Do you know what they did to her?" His fury is aimed at his father. "Her brothers...her father..."

"Wait," Will growls. "Did what? How old were you?"

“Policeman Bob, now’s not the time,” Judith warns.

“They fucking raped her repeatedly!” Atticus bellows. “Your fucking brother—my uncle—and his shit for brains sons! They killed her sister!”

I start to cry because all I can think about is Esther’s pale face as the blood and life drained from her body.

“No,” Abel says, his voice a choked whisper. “That’s...why would...I can’t...”

“I’m calling this in—” Will starts.

“You call this in and I’ll fucking kill you.” Atticus points a finger at Will. “Do you understand? You will not drag Eve through a media circus over this.”

I tense at the mention of my name.

Will stands too, not backing down from his brother. “Fine. But I think it’s high time you stop putting your dick in our cousin.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

atticus

This isn't happening.

This isn't fucking happening.

"Let's go." I march back into the dining room and snag Eve up by her wrist.

Dad and Will swarm me, but I'm not having any of it. I need to think. I need to get the fuck away from this house. Away from the bomb Dad just dropped on me.

"Man, I don't like the way you're fucking handling her," Will barks out after me. "Calm your ass down."

I turn mid stride, releasing Eve, to shove his chest. "She's not yours to concern yourself with."

"And she's yours?" he challenges.

My gut twists.

Was.

She was mine.

But now?

Fuck.

"Everyone just relax," Dad orders. "Tempers are hot. That was some heavy information I unloaded on you all. But we can—"

"Do what, Dad?" Undo the fact I've been fucking my cousin?

"Where are you going?" he asks, his tone defeated.

"I'm going back home. I need to think."

"Do it without your dick," Will warns.

"Will, go sit your ass in the dining room," Dad barks out. "Now!"

Eve flinches and cowers behind me. Protectiveness roars up inside me like a beast. It screams: mine, mine, mine.

But that's not true.

She's family.

Blood.

My goddamn cousin.

Shame boils my blood and bile rises in my throat. I'm disgusted. Flashes of what we did in the truck on the way over here make my stomach twist violently.

"We'll talk later," I growl at my father. "Let's go."

I toss Eve her coat and she hurries to put it on. The moment she does, I grab her wrist and haul her out of the house. She stumbles in the snow, but catches herself before falling. When we reach the truck, I let go of her hand and climb inside. It isn't until I have the truck started that I realize I've always helped her get into the vehicle.

My mind and heart war with each other.

Don't be an asshole, man.

Apparently I am an asshole, though, because I don't fucking move. It isn't until the truck door opens and my dad's angry face meets mine that I release the breath I've been holding. He assists his tiny niece into the truck.

"If you can't cool off over this, maybe you should take a breather from each other. I can send Judith—"

"Close the door," I say coolly. "Now."

He slams it shut, making Eve jump. I rake my gaze over her, my stomach churning. She looks too fucking pretty to be my cousin. Your cousin shouldn't have your cum still leaking out of her body.

Eve's panties are probably soaked.

Oh fuck.

What if I got her pregnant?

I've barely driven down the street before the bile rears its ugly head. I pull over and fling the door open in time to puke my fucking guts up.

My cousin.

I fucked my cousin.

This isn't something that goes away after two years like when I thought she was sixteen and we'd have to hide her age.

This is worse.

Not right.

Her gene pool is probably so fucked up and if we were together...
I puke again.

A hand touches my shoulder and I shake it away. It's not her fault. She doesn't deserve my wrath. But I'm too fucking broken right now. Her touching me could make things a helluva lot worse than they already are.

We have to get to Reed's.

He'll say the right things. Make me feel better.

What do I want him to say?

Deep in my bones, I know what I want. And, oddly enough, Reed would give me that reassurance I crave. But that's not right. At least with him and Devon, they weren't blood related. Their shit was fucked up, but not like this.

Eve and I are cousins.

She's a product of incest. If she stays with me, our children...

Who the fuck knows what our children would turn out like.

Life is cruel as hell. What kind of shit karma is this? Did I really fuck over Cassandra so bad that God was like, you just wait...?

I have to get Eve to Reed's because I need to leave her with them.

It's the best way.

A clean break.

My heart slams inside my ribcage, angry at that thought. It's the only sensible one, though. The only one that fits in this world we live in. The alternative is twisted and wrong.

Eve and I can never be.

No matter how much I love...

I shake away that thought as I spit out the last of the puke and slam my truck door. Love doesn't matter because karma has spoken.

A big bear and a little fox don't belong together.

That's just the honest to God truth of it all.

The truth fucking hurts.



The moment I park the truck, Eve launches herself out of the truck. Good. She can pack her shit while I get the trailer hooked up. I busy myself with my task, trying to desperately ignore the shitstorm going on inside my heart.

Silence.

I've given Eve silence, and oddly enough, she hasn't spoken a word either.

I spend the next half hour hooking the trailer up to my truck. I'm circling the trailer when I notice the door isn't latched. Fucking bears. I peek my head inside. It's dark and all the stacked boxes of supplies seem to be intact. I count my blessings—because after this day, I need a win—and shut the trailer. After I latch it closed, I make my way back inside. When I see her, it kills me.

Her hair is wet.

She showered one last time.

That revelation hits me hard in the heart.

Am I really taking her back?

I need time to think.

"Put a hat on so you don't catch cold," I grumble, walking past her to look in my room. All of her stuff is gone. With a heavy sigh, I grab a backpack and throw my clothes and toiletries into it. I'm not sure what'll happen when I get out there, but it'd be dumb to not bring stuff I might need. After brushing my teeth to get rid of the puke taste, I head back to the front room.

She stands in the kitchen, her shoulders slouched and her stance defeated. My body physically thrums with the need to go to her—to pull her into my arms and stroke through her now tangled hair. To kiss away this day and start fresh tomorrow.

Her teary brown eyes lift to meet mine.

I look away.

"Let's go." I grab a few more things and then usher her and Blind Bear out the door.

She has one of the backpacks strapped to the damn dog and he looks proud to be carrying her shit for her. At least someone can be a motherfucking hero for Eve.

I thought I was that someone.

I thought wrong.

We load the truck and within minutes we're leaving our little slice of home. I'd like to say I regret every second with her, but that's a big fucking lie. Those moments with her are going to be ones I'll never forget. I just can't give her more of them. Not now. Not after what I know.

All those books I gave Devon about incest...

I read them all.

I researched the fuck out of incest.

My holier-than-thou self thought I was helping. And had they truly been blood related, I think they should have been worried. In the end, that asshole reveals after the fact he'd adopted her. It was all for naught.

Though, now, I have all this knowledge spinning around in my brain.

Psychological disorders. Genetic mutations. Physical abnormalities.

We could never be happy. We could never continue on like a normal couple because the cloud of worry would always be there. Our future would be threatened because of the same blood that ran through our veins. The last thing I want to do to Eve is bring more heartache into her life. If we had a child...if it were deformed because of our blatant disregard to the facts, I wouldn't be able to live with myself. At least now, we can have a clean break and move forward. She can continue to be the wild thing she is and I'll try to forget the fact I'm madly in love with my cousin.

The drive is long. Hours and hours. She sleeps off and on, but otherwise remains quiet. It isn't until we finally pull up to Reed's cabin I helped build that's surrounded by a fence to keep bears out, that she finally speaks.

"Atticus..." Her voice is small, unsure.

I look over at her. Tiny and frail but with the fiercest brown eyes in the world. Same eyes as my father. Fuck. I scrub my palm over my face in frustration.

"Eve."

"We should get inside. It's late." Her bottom lip trembles and tears well in her pretty eyes.

Regret slams into me like a freight train, but I power forward. "I...I'm not going."

"Yes." Fire blazes in her eyes, stealing little bits of my soul in the process.

"Stubborn girl, I'm not going. I'm leaving you with Reed. I need to...I need to think."

"Think here."

I stare at her, wishing I could reach up and swipe away the tear on her cheek. "I can't." My voice cracks. "It's not wise."

"You're a stupid man, so it's fine."

Her insults don't cut me like she intends.

"It's not fine, Eve. We both know it's not right."

"It is right," she argues.

"Bab—er, Eve, I'm not going to fight with you about this."

She blinks her lashes hard, sending more tears racing down her cheeks.

"You promised."

"That was before."

"Nothing's changed!" she screams and then sobs.

"Everything's changed!" My body trembles with rage at our situation. It's unfair as fuck, but it's the reality we have to deal with.

"I love you," she whispers as she unbuckles and crawls my way. "Please."

I close my eyes when her palms find my cheeks. "It's unnatural. Wrong."

Warm lips press to mine. Doesn't feel fucking wrong.

"You're my husband. You can't leave." The pain in her words slices my heart right in two. She can keep the other half of my heart because it'll be fucking broken after this.

I open my eyes and grip her delicate jaw, pulling her slightly away. "I'm not your husband."

"Yes!" she cries out, hitting my chest. "Yes, you are!"

Grinding my teeth, I fight the tears in my own eyes. "I'm your fucking cousin, Eve. Get it through your goddamn head already."

She breaks from my hold and kisses me hard. I hate that she tastes like sweet forbidden fruit that I'm starved for. I hate that she's an addiction I'll die breaking myself of.

I grab her shoulders and push her away. "Stop."

"No."

"Yes," I bark out.

"You're my husband," she whispers again, her bottom lip wobbling.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I shake my head. "Did we have a wedding? Like Chandler and Monica? I'm not your fucking husband just like your goddamn father wasn't either. We're just sick fucks who have a thing for sweet little Eve."

She fucking slaps me. “Liar!”

“It’s the truth,” I hiss. “You don’t have a ring, you didn’t have a wedding, but goddammit, we sure do share that same last name, Eve Knox. Fucking hysterical, huh? I thought so too. Life’s a fucking cunt and it fucked us. It fucked us bad. Now we’re stuck picking up the pieces that are left over. We’ve gotta figure out how to make our lives work again. Without each other. You have Reed and Devon. They’ll take care of you. You’re not scared of people anymore. They love you. Let them love you, goddammit.”

“Fuck you,” she sobs.

“Already did, babe, and it was a mistake.”

I launch myself out of the truck so I don’t do anything stupid like pull her into my arms and promise her everything will be okay. I can’t lie to her like that. Nothing will ever be okay again. The tears on my own cheeks are hot and shaming. I unhook the trailer and unlatch the back so Eve can get to whatever shit she needs. Once I’m ready to go, I walk over to her side of the truck and open the door.

Her tears are gone.

Hate for me shines in her brown, violent eyes.

Hate for me.

The newest monster in Eve Knox’s world.

Big, bad bear with a razor-sharp words meant to cut into the little fox and make her bleed.

I’m sorry.

The apology is to both of us. I can’t say it aloud. It hurts too much.

“Tell Reed...I’ll be back.”

She swallows, shaking away my offered hand, and jumps out of the truck. Her backpack looks heavy, but she slings it over her shoulders like it weights nothing. No longer wearing the dress from earlier, she seems more like her normal self. Feral. Angry. Suspicious. Ready to cut throats. Blind Bear follows her out and they both stand beside the trailer as she straps the pack on his back. The dog whines while Eve glowers at me.

I want to go to her.

I want to kiss that frown right off her face.

Which is exactly why I need to get the fuck out of here.

“Stay with Reed. You’re safe with him. No bears with him. Understood?”

She flips me off. I almost smile knowing she learned this too from television, but I bite it back.

“Goodbye, Eve.”

She turns her back to me, her body shaking with sobs, and I climb into the truck.

Drive away.

Drive away.

My heart aches and bleeds and pleads and bargains and makes excuses.

I put the truck in reverse as though I can somehow rewind through every forbidden second with Eve.

My traitorous eyes find her tiny form as she cuddles her dog in the snow beside the trailer.

I look away.

And then I drive away, leaving my heart with her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

eve

I'm numb.

Completely numb.

Sick, horrified, devastated.

He left. He left me. He left me here. He left me here to die.

Blind Bear whines, nuzzling his big face against mine and licking away my tears. I failed my dog. He's punished to this existence along with me.

No more bacon.

No more macaroni and cheese.

No more *Friends*.

No more Atticus.

I fall into the snow, the ache inside me threatening to rip me in two. It's quiet tonight as the snow silently falls. I should go into the gate and call for Reed or Devon. They would pull me into their warm home, feed me fruit, and promise me I was safe.

I consider it.

I really do.

A warm bed.

Food.

The kids to cuddle and play with.

Creak.

At first, I think it's the sound of the trees as they bear the weight of the snow. But when I hear it again, Blind Bear growls.

I should call out and warn Reed it's me. Just little Eve lying in the snow feeling like she's going to die of a broken heart. Nothing to see here.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

The hairs on my arms stand on end. That's not Reed. That's... something else.

Click.

"Easy boy," a gruff voice says from behind the trailer. The glint of a gun can be seen, making my heart stop in my chest.

"BB," I whisper, grabbing onto his fur. "Stay."

A man steps into view. Dirty. Long, stringy hair. Grinning a toothless smile at me.

"What do you want?" I demand, slowly rising to my feet, feeling unfairly weighed down by my pack.

"I came for food, girl," he says, but then grabs his crotch. "I think I'll leave with more."

I'll gut him if he even thinks about touching me.

"The big man left ya, huh? Didn't want young pussy. I ain't discriminatin' over no pussy. I love pussy. 'Specially young pussy."

Blind Bear's growls become louder and I think if I weren't still clutching onto him, he would've already tried to attack. The man advances and I eye the tree line. I know there are a set of stairs Reed built that will take me down the side of the cliff. It's steep and not ideal to run down, but if I can make it to them, the snow-covered trees canopying over the stairs should provide cover.

"Why don't you come over here to the trailer and take those clothes off so I can look at ya?"

No.

No.

No.

"If you show me your cock, I'll cut it off and feed it to you," I warn, sliding my hand into my coat pocket to grip my knife.

"Feisty bitch. I'll look forward to makin' ya scream—"

His words are lost to me as I take off in a sprint toward the stairs. Blind Bear, attuned to me, runs with me. A gunshot goes off, splintering the bark on a tree nearby. I don't stop or scream or anything.

I focus on my goal.

The stairs.

The stairs.

The stairs.

I remember when Reed built them. I watched from afar. Devon would waddle out with a baby in her arms and another on the way, bringing him snacks and drinks. He'd stop his heavy lifting to press an adoring kiss to her lips and then say something to make her giggle. I'd been mesmerized by them. Their relationship was unlike anything I ever knew.

Aching loneliness settles in my stomach.

I did know it eventually.

With Atticus.

He made me smile like Reed does Devon. He loved me—loved my body—like I never knew was possible. And then the moment he found out who my parents were, he cut me off. As though I were a diseased limb that needed hacking off.

Another bang makes me cry out, but I'm at the stairs. I grab the handrail and try hard not to slip on the steps. Blind Bear fumbles his way down ahead of me. Heavy footsteps thud behind me. I'm quick and know these stairs, though. I race down them, eager to get to the bottom. Once down there, I can make it to Reed and Devon's old cabin. Maybe hide in the crevasse.

Each icy breath I take, I cramp in my stomach. I'm out of shape having been laid up in Atticus's house for so long. I never should have let my guard down. I willingly allowed myself to get weak.

Run.

Run.

Run.

I'm close to the bottom of the steps and when I see the snowy bottom that Blind Bear's already run through, I leap off the bottom step. I take off running toward the old cabin. The rush of the river is loud nearby. I'm not worried about wolves or mountain lions or bears. No, the predator that wants me is close and he's hunting me down with his gun. Nothing is more terrifying than him in this moment.

As I run, I wonder how the man got here. He most certainly came from the trailer. Which means it's likely he rode all the way out here with us. Was he the man who stole our fruit? My heart races faster than my legs can carry me through the heavy snow.

After what feels like hours of running, I realize I'm no longer being chased. I stop and listen for sounds. Wind whistling. River rushing. Wolves howling in the distance. No grunts or gunshots.

I reserve my energy and walk, knowing the way by heart. I could close my eyes and find the little cabin. It makes me understand how Blind Bear uses his other senses to get by.

My toes are numb and I'm exhausted. Thirsty. Starved. I can't stop, though. We need shelter and safety. I didn't realize until I'd been freed of the wild that I didn't like it out here. Atticus teased me with a life I loved—one that didn't require constantly thinking about survival—and I grew addicted to it. Had I never left, I would've never known what was out there. Now I know, though. It's a devastating reality that I'll never watch television again or eat ice cream or take a hot shower. I won't learn to read or go grocery shopping. I won't go to school or go to any more dinners at Muskies. I won't have sex.

The last thought makes me think about Atticus and it hurts too badly. A sob chokes me, but I swallow it down as I continue to trudge through the snow. When I see a structure, I nearly cry out with happiness. We can stop there and rest for the night.

"Here, boy," I croon to my dog. "We'll get warm in there."

I manage to get the gate open and then slide the lever in place. At least Reed took necessary precautions to protect them. I guide my dog into the cabin and then pull down yet another lever that will keep out predators—even those of the human variety.

Blind Bear shakes off the snow and slumps onto his side. I relieve him of his pack first. Then, I set to making a fire in their fireplace. They keep this cabin stocked with items in case Reed is ever kept away hunting or something. As soon as the flames flicker, I pull off my pack and then strip out of my cold, wet clothes. I grab the quilt off the bed and wrap up in it. Blind Bear scoots over to the fireplace, his tail swishing back and forth.

"We're not quite home yet," I tell him. "Tomorrow we'll make our way there." I don't have the heart to tell him it's not as nice as Reed and Devon's cabin. He'll learn that hard truth on his own.

The heat warms the space quickly and I'm thankful. I should eat something from my pack or drink water from one of the bottles I brought. Anything but sit here and feel sorry for myself. I just don't have the energy or the willpower.

My tears have run dry. They burn and sting. The ache in my chest feels as though it'll be a permanent part of me. I'll have to learn to get used to it. To cheer myself up, I think about Phoebe and Joey. Their antics. Ross and

Rachel's annoying way of never getting together and staying together. And finally, I think about Chandler and Monica. Those two don't cheer me up at all. Those break my heart even further.

A big yawn has my eyelids drooping and me slumping over. Tomorrow will be a better day. I'll regroup and figure out what to do next. Until then, I'll sleep away the pain.



Two days later...

"That's a good boy," I praise when Blind Bear trots back with a dead squirrel in his mouth.

Before BB, I'd relied on my traps. With him, I just have to tell him to get it and he does. It's nice having a dog to hunt with me. I scratch him behind the ears and then use my knife to hack off the squirrel's tail. It'll give him something to play with until I can cook it for us.

At home.

My home.

We set off from Reed's hunting cabin early this morning. It took a couple of days to recover from the loss of Atticus and then the chase with the man. I needed my energy before trekking to my home.

The sun is burning bright in the sky, blinding me with its reflection on the snow. I'm squinting and stumbling slightly when I see it. A little shack in the forest.

Home.

Warmth doesn't flood me.

Only cold.

For so long, it was just me with them. Scared and lonely without my sister. They twisted up their own wants and made me feel as though I had to do as they said.

Never again.

Atticus, though it hurts to think about him, trained me in a different way. Showed me small things to make me happy. Treated me as though I

were something he cherished and loved. For the first time in my life, I wasn't continuously afraid. He gave me a strength I didn't know I needed.

He's gone, but I'm still strong.

It buzzes in my veins.

An ember that's caught flame and become an inferno.

Anger and determination obliterate despair. It's all I have left.

"We're home," I tell BB. "It'll have to do."

He barks as though he understands and trots off. I stuff the dead squirrel in my pocket before walking over to a large tree beside the shack. It's where everyone I loved is buried. Not my father or my brothers. Papa and Ezekiel were killed in Reed's hunting cabin. I'm not sure what he ever did with their bodies. My other three brothers were left in my shack after Reed slaughtered them. One by one, I dragged them down to the river. I wanted them away from me. The river did the job for me.

No, under the tree is my mother and my sister Esther.

And them.

Kneeling at the base of the tree, I push snow away from their spot. When I reach the ground, I find four stones. Beneath each stone are the tiny little things I somehow loved even though it didn't make sense.

They weren't like Devon's children she bore. I'd watched the birth of Rowdy—assisted even—and it was not the same. She screamed and pushed and worked to get that giant baby out of her womb. It kicked and howled and breathed life. Devon went on to birth two more. Children that would grow to cry and laugh and crawl and talk. These were different.

Bloody.

Tiny.

Incomplete.

My body seemed to reject them, painfully so. Thankfully, each time one would come out, I would get myself alone, squat, and pull it out of me. It wasn't like when she gave birth. Not even close.

Mine never made sounds.

They never cried or squawked.

Not once did they ever move.

But I cried for all four of them. Each and every time. I kissed their tiny skulls that resembled a baby squirrel's and named them all.

Love. Mercy. Faith. Goodness.

I sang my mother's favorite hymns as I buried them.

I buried my little beings between my mother and my sister so they'd never be alone. So they'd never be cold or hungry or sad.

For a few moments, I sit in the quiet as I think about them. As I dream about what they could have been had they had a strong father like Atticus. They might have grown to be loud and busy like Rowdy. Always smiling like Ronan. Or a little fussy boy like Ryder. If Atticus were their father rather than Papa or my brothers, they would've had beautiful smiles. Infectious laughs. Generous hearts.

I start to cry, hating that I always cry when I think about him. I hastily swipe at my tears and stand. Blind Bear cocks his head at me, his fluffy tail wagging.

"Let's get a fire lit and get dinner cooked."

He barks.

And tomorrow, we'll start anew.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

atticus

Two months later...

I snort at the television, trying to squint my eyes so Monica will become one person instead of two blurry ones. No matter how many times I blink or rub at my eyes, I still can't make out her form.

And it pisses me right the fuck off.

With a rage-filled roar, I throw my nearly gone bottle of Jack Daniel's at the television. It makes a loud *thwap* sound before going black. I can't tell if I've cracked it or shattered it. Hell, I can't tell anything anymore.

Everything's a blur.

Nothing makes sense.

Now that the television is silent, I'm bombarded with thoughts I try every day to ignore. Thoughts that rape my mind whether I like it or want it. Always there. Fucking me painfully. Against my will. Goddamn abuse.

Her.

My thoughts always go to her.

Little fox.

Cousin.

Behind every angry growl of frustration is heartache and loss. But more importantly, guilt.

What I did was wrong.

I just dropped her off at Reed's. Dumped her into his lap as though she were his problem now. I didn't even fucking stay to tell him my sob story. Just dump and run.

Deep down, I know she'll be fine with them. Reed and Devon have always looked after Eve over the years, bringing her care packages and trying to get close to her. Maybe, this time, she'll even speak more than a couple words to them or try and get to know them better.

Or, in typical Eve fashion, she may just bail.

That's where the guilt really starts to gnaw at me. What if she left? What if she's hurt? What if another bear got her? I lie awake at night, my heart racing in my chest, as I worry about if she has enough to eat or if she's warm or if she's scared.

So many times, I make a decision in my head. Just go to her. I'll get as far as getting the truck packed. And then my head catches up to my heart. It reminds me things can't go back to the way they were. She's family. I can't continue fucking her. It's not right.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

They've all tried to come by—Ma, Will, Vic, Judith. I never answer. I don't pick up the phone. All I do is make frequent runs to the liquor store and try to drown in Jack. I just want the pain inside my chest to lessen.

It. Never. Lessens.

Each day it grows maddeningly worse.

I need her.

Fuck, how I need her.

I hear the jangle of keys and I roll my eyes. So far, no one has tried to come inside, knowing I need the space. This person doesn't care.

"The place smells like a distillery, son."

Dad's gruff voice echoes through my cabin. I don't even bother turning to look at him. I manage out a grunt and that's it.

He closes the door behind him and then I hear him rooting around in the kitchen. The smell of coffee suddenly permeates the air. It reminds me of Eve. She loved coffee. God, she loved everything. Nearly every single thing I'd offer her, she'd be in happy awe over.

Dad turns on the overhead light in the living room and begins picking up the shards of glass. I close my eyes, not interested in looking at him. A few minutes later, he sets a steaming mug beside me on the end table. He drags a chair from the kitchen into the living room and sits it right in front of me. Sipping from his mug, he leans back in the wooden chair and studies me.

"You look like shit," he finally says.

“Yeah, well, you have two heads, so I guess we’re even.”

He snorts. “You’re wasted.”

“So?” Anger swells up inside me like a tidal wave of lava—hot, bubbly, violent.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?” I spit out. “The fact I fucked my cousin?”

Rather than be shocked like I expected, he shrugs. “Sure. Let’s talk about it.”

I shoot him a nasty glare. “This fucking funny to you?”

His brow deepens. “The fact my son is a damn near alcoholic and suffering severe depression? Real fucking funny. What kind of asshole do you think I am?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know she was family. I should have known, right? She has your eyes, Dad.”

Dad leans forward to set his mug down beside mine and then pats my knee. I blink a few times and squint, bringing him back into focus. His brown eyes are full of concern.

“It’s coincidence of the century, sure, but there’s no way you could have known.” His words are soft, tentative. “You can’t let your life turn to shit over this, Atticus.”

Without her, I don’t have a life.

For years, I’ve worried about this girl. Her well-being has been on the back of my mind for a long ass time. Then, when I brought her here, everything changed. She breathed life into my mundane world and gave me something I’d been missing. Love, companionship, friendship. She filled holes in me that, in the past, only certain people could fill. Eve filled me to the brim with her. Every day was just her.

God, I was so fucking happy.

“You know,” he says, his voice turning wistful. “When I was a youngster and was seeing your mom, we knew it was wrong of her to be underage and myself older.” He pauses to scratch at his beard. “We didn’t care. Our love was all that mattered.”

I pick up my coffee and sip it. The burn feels good on my throat. It punishes me for driving her away.

He continues. “We were going to run away. So we could be together. I didn’t want to go to prison and your mom didn’t want to leave my side. Though we were so careful, people started to connect the dots that we were

together.” He frowns. “Your mother was only fifteen when we first slept together. I was old enough to do hard time for that shit.”

I wince, not truly down for hearing about their sex life. But the taboo element keeps me interested.

“Anyway, we were all packed and ready, your mom pregnant with Will, when her dad pulled us aside. He told me he didn’t give a rat’s ass that I was older. What he cared about was her happiness. And if I made her happy, then I needed to remain in her life. He said he couldn’t live without his happy little girl, so that meant there were just some things he had to accept.”

“This is different and you know it,” I growl, chugging more of the hot coffee.

“Is it? Because in the eyes of the law, her being underage was every bit as a fucked up situation as you sleeping with your cousin.”

“It was...it was more than just sleeping with her,” I croak out, hating that my eyes burn with unshed tears. “I loved her. Fuck, I still do. I can’t erase her from my mind. I can’t pull her claws from my heart. She owns me and I don’t know what to do about it.”

Dad gives me a soft smile and squeezes my knee. “She makes you happy. Right now, you’re a miserable shit.”

I snort and flip him off.

“I love you, son, and it’s quite clear that you love her. If you want to be with Eve, then you have your answer. Just like my siblings fell in love. They ran off to be together. No one chased them and no one will chase you. But as your father, I can’t sit here and watch you drink yourself to death.”

“You’re giving me permission to fuck my cousin?” I bark out a cold laugh. “Right. Okay.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and leans back. “I’m telling you to do whatever makes you happy, boy. All those years of you traipsing through the woods? That made you happy. Not abiding by the town rules and society. You loved to go out there and be your own man. No matter how hard you tried, you didn’t fully fit in regular, everyday life. You living in this remote cabin and still spending most of your days out there in the wild is a testament to that.”

“I...I...I hurt her.”

“I saw the fire in that girl’s eyes. Takes a lot to keep her down.”

“You don’t understand,” I choke out. “I abandoned her. She thought... she called me her husband. What kind of husband drops their wife off in the middle of the damn woods? I fucking failed her.” Tears leak down my cheeks and I swipe them away hastily. I’ve never in my adult life cried in front of my dad except when I brought Judith to him after a long, exhausting search.

“I failed your mother plenty of times,” he says. “Ask her. When we dated and then after marriage. So many times I just did stupid shit that made her crazy. But guess what? She’s my wife. And you know what wives do?”

I stare at him dumbly. I don’t fucking know.

“They stick with you through the thick and the thin. Good and bad. Sickness and in health. The whole gig. All of it. Wives are goddamn angels.”

“She’s not really my wife,” I grumble. “Though try convincing her.”

“Then I only see one solution here and it isn’t to continue drinking yourself into liver failure.”

“If I go to her...if I’ll willingly be with her...” I scrub my palm down my face. “I’m disobeying the law.”

“You were doing that anyway when you thought she was sixteen.”

God, I forget how much he and Will are alike and their uncanny ability to put all the puzzle pieces together with just a sliver of information.

“She’s my...it’s incest, Dad.”

“Eve is a product of incest. Try convincing her it’s wrong.”

I let out a dark laugh. “I can’t convince her of shit. She’s the most stubborn woman I know.”

He smiles. “No one has to know, kiddo. For as little as you come to town, it won’t be an issue. I’ve already talked to the family about it. We all agreed this is Knox family business. No one else’s. And at the end of the day, we take care of our own. You and Eve included.”

My heart does a painful thud in my chest. “What if I go and she hates me? It’s been two months, Dad. What if she’s...” Dead. Pain lances through me.

“If she hates you, it’ll only be temporary. Trust me. You woo the shit out of her, grovel like a motherfucker, and then you claim your woman.”

Each thump of my heart reminds me I’m alive and my wife is out there. I just need to go find her. I need to get her back. For the first time since Dad explained who she was, I feel hope.

“What if she can’t get past it?”

“She will.”

“What if...Dad, what if she’s dead?”

His lips purse together as he scrutinizes me. “You think she is?”

“Honestly...no.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because she’s wild fire with a spine of steel. Deadly and fierce. She’s a survivor and she doesn’t give up. That girl is stubborn as hell, which serves her well out there.”

“And what are you, Atticus?”

I sit up, my blood burning hot with the desire to hunt, claim, and love.

“I’m her husband.”

“So start acting like it.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

eve

Running.

Running.

Running.

Despite every protesting muscle in my body, I push forward with one goal in mind. Get away from him. The man I've taken to calling Wretch in my head, stalks us. Blind Bear and I had fallen into a quiet routine. Away from everyone. Introspective. Living each day to survive and nothing more. If I was hunting or scavenging or building something, then I wasn't thinking about him.

Not Wretch.

Atticus.

Rather than weaken me with the usual ache in my chest, I use him in this moment. I think of his protective nature and strong presence. I draw from him, sucking air into my smarting lungs, and then harness the way it always felt to be near him. Safe. Cared for. Loved. It stokes my inner fire and gives me the fuel I need to keep running.

Wretch must have stolen more guns from Atticus's trailer because he shoots at me with a rifle. The bullets whizz through the air, but BB and I are too far ahead of him to reach us. Had he not stopped to set my shack on fire, we'd be dead already. But because he'd been preoccupied with trying to burn down the home with us in it, BB and I were able to bolt.

I passed Reed's hunting cabin ages ago, which means I'll hit the stairs soon. I just hope I can make it up the steps without getting shot.

I have to get to Reed.

He'll know what to do.

It's what Atticus would want me to do.

As much as I want to hate Atticus, I can't. I don't. He's my Atticus. Even if I can't have him. He'll always be mine. My heart starts to ache when I think about his handsome face that I almost miss the stairs. Blind Bear, having already familiarized himself with all the paths in the past two months, doesn't miss it and bounds up ahead of me. I hobble after him, weak and tired.

Whizz. Whizz.

Two bullets hit the stairs near me, making me scream in shock. I continue up the steps, trying desperately to outrun him. Wretch is relentless. If he didn't always catch me off guard, I would show him how it feels to be stalked and terrorized.

I start to get a pain in my stomach from breathing cold air and running. Ignoring the throbbing, I rush up the last few steps. I've just made it to the top landing when fire hits me in the back.

"Ahhh!" I cry out.

Don't stop.

Keep going.

Tears freely leak out of my eyes, but I keep running toward the gate. When it opens from the inside and my dog rushes in, I nearly sob in relief.

"Help! Reed!" I scream.

Reed—giant and fierce with his dark beard and crazed eyes—comes into view, a shotgun in his hand. He aims it right for my head. I duck out of the way and then he fires.

Boom!

Wretch curses behind me, but I don't think he's been hit. Regardless, now he has Reed after him, so he better run.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Reed continues past me, popping away on his shotgun. I rush into the gate, right into the waiting arms of Devon. Her pregnant belly presses against me. Suddenly, my fear of getting killed is outweighed with the worry she'll get hurt instead.

"Y-You have to get inside," I tell her, my teeth chattering from a mix of fear and cold. I'd run out of the shack half asleep. No shoes. No coat. Nothing.

"Oh my God," she whimpers. "You're freezing cold. Where are your shoes?"

She guides me toward the big cabin, clinging to me so I don't fall. It's then I realize my feet are bruised and bloody from sticks and brush. There may not be snow anymore and we're pushing into spring, but it's still bitter cold, especially at night.

We make it onto the porch and then inside the cabin. It's warm and smells like apple cinnamon—my favorite oatmeal flavor. The fact I know this makes me smile just a little. I learned a lot while with Atticus. Not nearly enough, but a lot.

"We heard gunshots," she says as she helps me sit on their sofa. "When Atticus had left that trailer a couple months ago, we figured you were healed and he dropped you off too. The gunshots made us think maybe you were in trouble. Reed flew out of here and it looks like just in time too." She grabs a blanket and wraps it around me. "Let me put tea on and throw some logs on the fire. Try to warm up."

Buddy—their old dog—limps into the living room and eyes Blind Bear with interest. Blind Bear wags his tail and then flops on the ground, exhausted from our narrow escape. Buddy sniffs him but must deem him safe because he also falls to the ground. Neither dog bothering to throw a stink about the other.

"Will Reed be okay?"

She smiles and it stretches across her face. "Of course he will. It's Reed. He's the predator. Everything else out there exists because he allows it."

I let loose a giggle. The pride she has for Reed reminds me of how I was with Atticus. At my laughter, her eyes widen.

"I don't think I've ever heard you..." She frowns. "You haven't ever spoken much, but laughed? Never."

I haven't laughed much in the last two months.

"I think I learned it watching *Friends*."

"*Friends*, huh?" She snorts. "I want to hear more of this story when I get back."

As she busies herself, I gently pull down the blanket and look over my shoulder. My hoodie is soaked in blood. That monster shot me. Anger surges through me, but I'm too tired to do anything about it.

The door flings open and Reed steps through, a scowl on his face. "Who was that guy?"

"Wretch. Short for Wretched Man." I shrug and then wince. "He stalks me like I'm dinner he needs to hunt. We've been playing this game for two

months.”

Reed cocks his head, his brows furling. “You’re babbling.”

“I’m tired and that asshole woke me up by burning down my house. Then, he shot me. The babbling is keeping me from passing out.”

He smirks and shakes his head. “What did he do to you?”

“Shot me.”

“No, not him. Atticus.”

Tears well in my eyes and I break his gaze. He stares at me intensely before walking into another room. He returns with a kit.

“I thought the only word you knew was fruit,” he says as he sits on the table in front of the sofa. “Your eyes spoke volumes, though.”

“I haven’t spoken to anyone in two months besides Blind Bear over there.”

He opens the kit and starts rifling through supplies. “Oh? What about Atticus?”

“What about him?” I ask bitterly.

His eyebrow lifts at my sharp words. “He just dropped you off without even saying hello to us? Seems out of character. He usually stays for weeks at a time when he comes to visit.”

“He was in a hurry to get away.”

“From what?”

“Me.”

Reed narrows his eyes. “Hmmm.” He leans forward to inspect my shoulder. “Fucker shot you. Take your hoodie off and let me see the damage. Turn around so I can see your back.”

I start to tug it up, but pain stops me. “Owwww.”

Devon rushes in with a teacup in hand. She sets it on the table beside the supplies and gives me a sympathetic smile. Ryder starts to cry from the other room. She rushes off as I gingerly slide my arm through the arm hole on my injured side. Then, I tug away the hoodie, twisting to reveal my back to Reed. His fingers are cold as he flits them over my skin.

“That bullet needs to come out. Luckily it doesn’t look deep.” He starts digging around in the kit. “This is going to hurt. Maybe I should grab some whiskey.”

“I can take it,” I assure him. “Been mauled by a bear, remember? Wretch is nothing.”

“Still same fierce Eve,” Reed says with a chuckle. “Now she’s a smartass too.”

“Better to be a smartass than a dumbass.” I learned that one from TV.

He laughs loudly and then cold liquid drenches my injured shoulder, making me squeal. “Sorry,” he mutters, his voice amused. “Now stay still. I’m going to dig it out.”

Devon returns with her dark-haired baby nursing from her breast. She wears a frown of worry. I can’t help but stare at her as she cradles the baby. He’s big, chunky, alive. My eyes water as I think about my little beings under the tree. So small and weak.

She comes to sit beside me on the sofa. I can’t help myself when I reach forward to touch his fuzzy head. Soft like a baby bunny. I want to pull him to me and inhale the scent of his hair.

Devon’s eyes are wide as she regards me with curiosity. I howl when Reed’s hand clamps into my shoulder to hold me still and starts digging with some sort of tool into the wound. Devon reaches over to hold my hand, sympathy in her gaze. I sob loud enough that I wake their other two children.

“Daddy,” Rowdy says, holding Ronan’s hand. “Why are you making Eve cry?”

“She’s got a bullet in her,” Reed explains. “I have to get it out and it hurts.”

Rowdy and Ronan walk closer, eyes shining with curiosity. Ronan breaks away from his brother to climb onto the sofa and sit next to me. Rowdy climbs on the back of the sofa and perches there like a bird, watching me with a cocked head.

“Sorry,” Devon says. “They’re curious.”

I nearly black out from pain, but then Reed exclaims that he got it. He drenches me in liquid that stings and then starts to sew the flesh. Trying to ignore the sting, I focus on Ronan. He watches me with wide eyes and touches my hair with his tiny hands. My heart melts.

“Here.” Devon leans forward to grab the teacup and then offers it to me.

I sip the hot but weak liquid and let out a sigh. “Do you have coffee?”

Reed laughs again. “Yeah, we have coffee, city girl. You need rest, though. I promise you a cup in the morning.”

I frown and sip more of the tea. “He’ll come back.”

“Atticus?”

Wincing at his words, I shake my head. “Wretch.”

“I’ll blow his goddamn head off if he tries.”

“Good.”

“You going to tell us what happened? Why did Atticus drop you off and bail?” Reed’s voice is stern and commanding. He wants answers. I just don’t know if I can voice them. It hurts too much.

“He had to,” I tell him, my voice quivering as I hug my hoodie to me.

“That doesn’t sound like Atticus,” Devon murmurs. “He’s caring and thoughtful. He doesn’t abandon his friends.”

Friends.

I choke on a sob.

“He, uh, I’m not his friend.”

Devon looks past me at Reed and I can feel the silent conversation between them. They’re trying to understand. My heart hurts so much. In *Friends*, they told each other things that hurt and it helped. Devon and Reed are my friends, even if I’m not very good at being one back.

“We...” I trail off. “I loved him.” Still do.

Devon sucks in a sharp breath. “Oh.”

Reed is silent behind me as he bandages me up.

“Then something happened?” Devon encourages.

I think about my favorite show and explain all my heartache and loss in a way they’ll understand being real *city folks* and all. “We broke up.”

“Eve—” Reed’s voice is lethal, but Devon cuts him off.

“Not now,” she whispers. “So he left you here with us? Why didn’t you come to us?”

“Wretch must have caught a ride in the trailer. As soon as Atticus was gone, Wretch was there. Shooting and chasing. I ran and ran. Been at my shack until tonight. He set it on fire.” Tears well in my eyes. I lost everything. My packs. My stores of food. My clothes. Everything I ever owned was in that shack.

Nausea roils in my stomach.

Defeat infects me as I come to the realization that loss is all I’ll ever know.

“I, uh, I need to use the bathroom,” I squeak out as I stand. The room spins as I turn. Reed grips my arm to keep me from falling.

“What the—” He yanks my hoodie out of my grip.

Devon gasps.

Rowdy giggles and Ronan stands up on the sofa to touch my stomach.
“Baby,” Ronan chirps in his cute toddler voice. “Baby like Momma.”

With one arm covering my breasts, I use the other hand to palm my slightly protruding stomach. Hot tears rush down my cheeks. *I wish, little Ronan. I wish I could have babies like your momma.* Every morning I think strong thoughts. I think of Atticus in the early hours, hoping to give the energy to my little being. If I think about burying the little one with the others, it makes me cry and cry. I’m so tired of crying. I want to keep it. I want it to grow and live like Devon’s children. It’s a piece of Atticus I crave to hold and love.

The room spins and strong arms keep me from falling.
Everything goes blissfully black.



I wake the next morning and the cabin is quiet. I’m wearing new clothes that must belong to Devon. I don’t remember changing into them. Last night was a blur of pain and sobbing. As the sun peeks in the windows, I begin my every morning ritual. Rubbing my palm over my stomach, I speak to my being.

“Your father is big and strong. Beautiful. Gentle and kind.” Tears leak down my temples. “He would love you if he knew. I have no doubts about that.” I let out a ragged sigh. “He’s not like the others. The hateful ones who hurt me before. Like Wretch.”

Still out there.

Still waiting.

“He won’t hurt you,” I assure my being. “Maybe...I don’t know... maybe you can fight really hard. Maybe you don’t have to go with the others between my mother and sister. Maybe you can stay with me. Maybe one day we’ll see him again. Together.”

Hope is deadly.

It infects me. Rushes through my veins and buries itself in the marrow of my bones. When it’s done consuming me from the inside out, it heats my flesh and threatens to devour me whole.

“I may be a little fox, but I’m a hunter. One day you’ll be a hunter too. One day I’ll hunt you down a television so you can know about pizza and *Friends* and cartoons. I will learn to read and then I’ll teach you too. I will be the best mom. I won’t let anyone hurt you ever.”

My heart blazes with conviction.

As long as Wretch is out there—horrible like Ezekiel and my father and my other brothers—he’ll always be a threat. I need to eliminate that threat if my little being has any hope of growing into a baby.

He will.

This being is half Atticus.

Strong. Strong. So strong.

I climb out of the bed and start pulling on the boots that were left out for me. I slip out of the extra bedroom and creep down the hallway. It doesn’t take long to find one of their packs and toss some supplies in it. Devon’s coat hangs by the door. She won’t mind if I borrow this. On the way out, I grab Reed’s shotgun too.

“Blind Bear, you coming?”

He groans but then rises, his fluffy tail swishing.

“Good boy. Let’s go kill us a rat.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

atticus

It's late in the afternoon and the sun has warmed the spring day to the point I probably won't need my coat today. Smoke billows from Reed and Devon's chimney. It makes me wonder what they're cooking for supper. My stomach growls because when I left this morning, I didn't grab anything to eat. Just filled my truck with supplies and flew out of there in my haste to get to her.

She'll be upset.

I know Eve. She'll give me her angry scowls and pout. But I have plans to woo her. I brought peanut butter and oatmeal and coffee. She'll forgive me. At least, I hope.

I'm just parking the truck when the gate opens.

Eve.

Eve.

Eve.

But it's not her.

It's my friend.

I shut off the truck and hop out. He has his .45 in his grip. For one second—based on the fierce glint in his eyes—I'm afraid he might shoot me.

"Hey, man," I call out, waving.

His eyes narrow and his nostrils flare. "Why are you here?"

I'm caught off guard by his words. "To visit."

"Who?"

Unease trickles down my spine. This feels like a loaded question and considering it's coming from a man holding a loaded gun, I choose my

words carefully.

“Everyone.” But mostly Eve.

Reed prowls forward and it reminds me of when he’s hunting. His proverbial hackles are raised. The thrill of the hunt is coursing through his veins as violence shines in his eyes.

“Eve here?”

Wrong words.

He pounces on me, his hand finding my throat as he throws me against my truck. I’m technically bigger than Reed, but this man is feral and uncontained. He lost that docile element most people living in society have years ago, probably when Eve’s family decided to rape his wife. Reed’s been a rabid bear ever since, protecting what’s his.

But Eve?

She’s not his.

She’s mine.

“What the fuck,” I snarl, glowering at him.

“Yeah, what the fuck is right, you hypocritical bastard.”

Anger surges up inside me and I shove him away. My throat throbs from the hold he had. I’ll probably bruise. Fucker.

“Why are you being an asshole?” I demand, rubbing at my neck, eyeing the way his hand holding the gun trembles.

“Me? You’re the one who dropped Eve off on my doorstep like she was an unwanted puppy,” he accuses, his eyes flashing with fury. “Real asshole move if you ask me.”

Guilt swarms up inside me, stinging me everywhere all at once.

“Does she hate me?” I ask, my words a mere, broken whisper.

He lets out a derisive snort. “Hell no. From what I could tell, she loves you.”

Hope surges hot and brilliant in my chest. “I want to see her.”

“You can’t.”

“The fuck I can’t!”

He approaches again but doesn’t touch me. Just gets right in my face. “All those years you gave me shit about Devon. And here you were fucking a sixteen-year-old. That’s called being a hypocrite, man.”

“She—”

“And she’s not just any kid, Knox, she’s Eve. Sweet, scared, little Eve. I don’t even want to fucking know how you got her to sleep with you. But so

help me if you forced or manipulated her—”

“Fuck you!” I roar, shoving him hard. “I may be a hypocrite, but I’m not a goddamn monster. I love her, dammit. I wouldn’t hurt her.”

He shoves his gun into the back of his jeans—thank fuck—and crosses his arms over his massive chest. “When the pussy got old, you dropped that shit on my front lawn?”

“Talk about her that way again and so help me, Reed, I will make you regret that shit,” I threaten, taking a step toward him.

“You still can’t speak to her.”

Fucking bastard. “I need to make things right.”

“Boo fucking hoo, Atticus.”

I’m going to punch this guy if he doesn’t stop his shit and let me see my woman.

“She’s gone,” he says.

“Gone? Did she go to her shack? Where the fuck did she go?”

“I think she went after him.”

I stand there, staring at him in confusion. “Her dog?”

“Fuck no,” he snaps. “Not her dog. Him. Wretch. The fucker who has a major hard-on for trying to kill her.”

Wretch?

What the hell is he talking about?

“Man, you’re not making any sense—”

“She told us about the fruit. The guy who broke the window.”

My blood grows cold at his words.

“Apparently the toothless bastard hitched a ride in your trailer.”

No.

Fuck no.

“Chased her right off my property. She’s been avoiding the bastard ever since. That was until last night when he set her shack on fire with her in it.”

I drop to my knees, the fear of her dying consuming me to the point I can’t breathe. I clutch at my chest, tears burning trails down my cheeks.

“She got away,” he says coolly. “But he shot her.”

I snap my head up and growl, “He what?”

“Shot. Her.” He gazes off toward the trees. “Pulled the bullet out myself. This morning, she was gone. Took some shit of ours, including a shotgun, so I know she has plans to go after him. I’ve been packing some shit this afternoon. I’ll need to go out there and help her.”

“No.” I scrub my palm over my face. “You need to stay with Devon and the kids. I’ll go. I will find her.”

He sneers at me. “I can’t trust you with her, Knox. You already abandoned her when she needed you most.”

“I was confused and stressed the fuck out,” I scream at him. “You don’t understand any of it.”

“I understand you left her because she’s pregnant,” he says at the same time I say, “She’s my cousin.”

“Cousin?” he asks, confused.

I blink, trying to process his words. “Pregnant?” I rise to my feet. “My wife is pregnant?”

Reed’s anger has morphed into a softer expression. “Your wife? She didn’t tell me any of this. You married your cousin? You? Atticus Hypocrite Knox?”

“Fuck off,” I bite out. “She’s mine. That’s all you need to know.”

Pregnant.

Pregnant.

My sweet, fierce Eve is pregnant.

What if something is wrong with the baby? She’s my fucking cousin!

But the baby is mine. Wrong or not. Ours. Innocent and created from love. I swipe at the tears and rise to my feet. I’ll go to her. I’ll find her and drag her back home with me if it’s the last thing I do.

The thought of her out there all alone, facing off with some bastard who wants to kill her, is almost too much to bear. Feral protectiveness surges through me as I start scrambling to grab my backpack out of the truck. I have a tent for emergencies that I use for hunting, so I locate that and strap it to my bag. I’m just fishing guns out from under the back seat when Reed calls my name.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to her.”

“Tell me what happened. Before you go.”

I shove my Glock into the front of my jeans and then grab my ax to shove into a loop on my backpack. Once I shut the door, I turn toward him and toss him the keys.

“I took her back. Nursed her back to health. Fell in love. Eve always told me I was her husband. I never argued it because I secretly liked that shit. But I was all fucked over her age because I thought she was a kid. And

she thought I wanted to hear that she was sixteen because that's the age I pegged her as and kept going on about it. She doesn't understand laws and age, but she's nineteen, man. I found that out over dinner with my family when she casually mentioned her real age. After I'd been obsessing over it for weeks. This was the same dinner my dad decided to tell me she's his niece. My cousin. A real clusterfuck. I didn't think...it was wrong..." I trail off and give him a helpless look. "I failed her. I failed my sweet little Eve. Told her we couldn't be together because it's fucking incest. Brought her here to you because if I kept her, I'd ignore the laws of the land and never let her go."

He studies me for a long moment. "What changed?"

"Nothing. I was miserable without her. The second my dad told me who she was, I was miserable. Because I couldn't have her. There's no life where she doesn't exist inside it that is worth living." I scrub at my face with my palm. "And now she's pregnant. My cousin who happens to be my wife in both our eyes is pregnant. I need to get to her so we can be a family. We should have never separated. Everything's messy and fucked up and horrible without her."

"What are you going to do when you find her?"

"I'm going to keep her."

He smiles at me, the anger from before slipping away. "Devon has supper ready. At least leave with a full stomach. When you find her, bring her back before you haul her back to your cave. The kids will want to say a proper goodbye."

I scan the woods behind him.

The call of the wild sings to me, beckons me.

Pleads for me to prowl into it and find peace there.

Eve is my peace.

She's my wild.

I always knew I belonged out there. I just didn't realize it's because I'd always been searching for her. Even before I knew her. Before she was born. Just a feeling. A sensation. A need. And now that I've been exposed to the wild, I'm a slave to it. To her. My heart is shackled to hers.

I'll never be free.

I don't ever want to be free.

I want to be chained to her wild heart until the end of this life.

"Knox..."

“Tell Devon to make me something for the road. I’m leaving in five minutes.”

He grins. “Go get our girl.”

As he trots back inside the gate, I grab a few more supplies from the bed of the truck. By the time I walk over to the gate, he’s coming back out, a thermos in hand.

“Bad bear stew. Devon’s specialty.”

I take the stew and with a wave, I start out on my journey to find her.

Mine.

She’s mine and I’ll get her back.

I don’t care if I have to search every goddamn inch of Alaska.

I will hunt her down and claim her again.

This time forever.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

eve

Four months later...

I sniff the air. Lingering body odor. A hint of fire. Now that we're well into summer, his stench is easier to find. Also, he's getting reckless. After nearly getting his ass shot last month, he wasted the rest of his ammo, unloading into the trees at me. I had to take cover, which gave him enough time to escape, but I've picked back up on his trail. Silently stalking.

Blind Bear is a good dog and knows when to be quiet. When I stop, he stops. Together, we listen for sounds. Sometimes, he hears them better and starts in the direction we need to go. Other times, we rely on my sight. Wretch leaves a trail behind wherever he goes. Fire remains. Bloody bones from his latest game kill. Though there hasn't been much of that lately.

I smile, knowing he doesn't have a way to kill the animals and he can't come back to check any of his traps. Not with us on his trail. Hunting him.

Kneeling beside a recent fire pit, I hover my hand over it. Slightly warm. He isn't that far ahead of us. The pile of bones discarded in the fire are small. Maybe a rat or a baby bunny or squirrel. Not enough to keep him fed and strong.

I stand, listening for more sounds, but hear nothing.

I feel everything.

A roll and then a shiver of excitement.

The being is more than a being. It's a baby. A strong one. One that kicks and rolls frequently. Pride surges through me. I knew it would be a survivor. With Atticus being its father, how could it not be?

I rub my stomach. “It’s okay, wild one. We’ll find him. We’ll get rid of him and then we’ll visit the kids again. I think you’d like them.”

The baby rolls again.

I’m smiling down at my stomach when I hear it.

Crunch.

Blind Bear growls. I quietly shush him. No sense in giving up our location if we can help it. He remains at my side, his head cocked as he listens.

Something heavy splashes into the river. Before I can stop him, Blind Bear tears off toward the sound. I’m staring off after him when the hairs on my arm stand up. I swivel around just in time to see Wretch charging for me.

Boom!

Wretch must get clipped because he howls but doesn’t stop. He has a giant limb in his hand. I aim for him again, but he nails me in the head with the limb, knocking me down to the ground.

He grabs a handful of my hair, his putrid scent making my stomach clench violently, and pulls me to my knees. I fire off another shot that misses him completely before he manages to wrestle the shotgun out of my hands. Blind Bear races forward. He releases me to aim for my dog.

No!

I kick Wretch in his gut, making him fall backward. The gun booms again, but at least it’s pointing up rather than at BB.

“Run, BB!” I cry out. “Run!”

My voice echoes through the trees. Blind Bear must understand because he takes off into the woods. I’m struggling to scramble away from Wretch when he aims the shotgun right at my stomach. Evil glitters in his eyes and he grins his disgusting, toothless smile at me.

“Someone knocked your skinny ass up,” he says. “Should’ve been me.”

“Fuck you!” I scream, kicking at him again.

“You will, bitch. You fucking will. Get on your hands and knees unless you want me to pump the rest of the bullets in this gun into your stomach.”

Anger pulses through me hot and volatile. *Think, Eve.* What would Atticus do? *Be strong for you, wild one.* Think. If I protest, I have no doubt Wretch will shoot me. Shooting at me has been his favorite activity since I first met him. I need to stall until I can get to my knife.

“Okay,” I murmur. “Just don’t shoot.”

He grunts, glowering at me. "Take off that backpack."

I wrangle myself from the pack and drop it beside me. The knife I have is tucked into one of the side loops. I'll grab it when he's not looking—

My pack goes sailing as he kicks it away.

"On your hands and knees."

I turn and scan the ground for anything to use as a weapon. Within reach is a rock. I don't know if I can pick it up, but if I can, it'll hurt if I hit him with it. Slowly, I inch forward. The barrel of the gun presses into the back of my head as he grabs the top of my jeans. Since my belly is so big, I can't fasten them. He's easily able to wrench them down my thighs.

Stay strong.

Stay strong.

As I hear him fumble with his own clothes, I'm thrust into the past. For some reason I think of Nathaniel. At one time, I liked to play with him when we were little. He was always nice to me.

Until Ezekiel and Papa were killed.

He came back that night different.

Formed into a predator.

Night after night, Nathaniel transformed from my brother into this monster no better than Ezekiel or the others.

A cock rubs against my ass and then he spits. I'm dragged from the horrible things my brother did and brought back to the now.

Protect my wild one.

No longer a being.

My strong baby.

I inch forward, reaching for the rock. The barrel of the shotgun digs against my skull.

"Don't fucking think about it, bitch. Your hole will still be hot and wet, even with your head missing."

He makes a sick thwack sound and I cringe, wondering what he's doing. I start to reach for the rock again, but his weight crushes me to the ground. I'm barely kept upright and from squashing my baby by my elbows. Heat floods over my back and then he falls beside me. All I need is a moment without a shotgun pointed at my head. I scramble forward and grab the heavy rock. I swing around to hit him with it, but he's not chasing me. He's simply staring at me with his eyes wide-open.

And an ax sticking out of his skull.

My hand trembles and I nearly drop the rock. I clutch it tighter as I whip my head to the right. Another stands there. Big, tall, feral.

Like a big bear.

An overgrown beard and crazed, violent eyes.

A happy, blind dog at his side.

“There you are, wife.”

I slump, dropping the rock as a full-bodied shuddering sob wracks through me. He kneels in front of me and his large hand gently caresses my big stomach.

“Our baby,” he whispers, his green eyes shining with pride and fierce protectiveness.

“Yes.”

He smiles and in this moment, I realize it’s truly him. Atticus. My husband. The man who came for me. As though I weigh nothing, he hauls me to my feet and then pulls my pants up my thighs.

“Did he...”

“No.”

“Good because I was wondering how I would kill a man who was already dead.”

I let out a silly laugh. I haven’t laughed in months. It feels good. I missed it.

“Your pants won’t zip,” he says, frowning.

“Your baby is big.”

Our eyes meet and his smile is wide. Proud. Happy.

I let out a squeal when he scoops me in his arms. I wrap my arms around his neck and nuzzle my face against his beard. It’s longer than I’ve ever seen it.

“I let you go for two months,” he says, his voice pained as he walks. “Then, I hunted you for four more. I can’t ever spend another day without you, babe.”

Emotion overcomes me and I sob against his neck. I missed him so much. Every single moment of every day, I thought of him. Of us. Of our baby.

“I’m so tired,” I admit. “Do you have any fruit?”

“There’s my girl. And don’t worry. I’m going to take care of you now. You’re safe. You’re mine. You’ll never have to be afraid or hungry or sad again.”

Sounds like a dream come true.

We walk for a long time until we're far from Wretch's expired body. We're in a clearing that overlooks the river with a path leading down to the water.

"We can camp here for a few days. Eventually, we'll make our way back to Reed and Devon. You're far from home, little fox."

My heart warms as he sets me to my feet. I watch as he efficiently begins setting up a camp. For months, I've lived under whatever shelter I could come by. It was the most animalistic surviving I'd done in years. No home. No one other than my dog. My pack supplies long since dwindled. Everything I consumed was something I found or hunted. I knew eventually I'd need to make a home for me and my wild one, but I couldn't rest until Wretch was gone.

And he is gone.

Dead.

Thanks to Atticus.

Speaking of my big bear, I watch with a ravenous stare as he peels off his shirt to start erecting his tent. His artful—tattoos I since learned—back glistens in the sunlight. Blind Bear is happy as can be now that our big guy is reunited with us. His tail wags happily and I swear it looks like he's smiling.

"Fruit?" I remind Atticus, my stomach growling fiercely.

He looks over his shoulder, a feral glint in his eyes. "I have fruit. But I can do one better."

I cock my head to the side. "Don't keep me in suspense," I sass.

He laughs and it echoes off the trees, filling my soul with joy. "God, I missed that mouth."

Abandoning his half built tent, he rummages through his pack. When he pulls out a jar, I cry out, my hand at my chest.

"No."

"Oh, yes, baby."

His eyes, filled with love and tenderness, gleam in the sunlight as he approaches. He unscrews the lid and the heavenly scent of peanut butter fills my nostrils. A whine bubbles up my throat.

"I love you," I whimper.

"I love you too."

He kisses my forehead as I dive two fingers into the untouched jar. I suck off the delicious, sticky peanut butter from my fingers and groan with delight. He winks at me before going back to the tent. I happily scoop out the peanut butter while I visually devour Atticus's muscular form.

He's beautiful.

And here with me.

Mine.

With practiced ease, he builds us a temporary home. A fire pit. A tent. He tells me he'll be right back and after about thirty minutes, he returns with my pack and his bloody ax. I've since sat down and closed the jar to save it for later.

"You want to wash up in the river? You look like you haven't bathed in months, Eve."

"And you haven't shaved in just as long." I arch a brow at him.

He smirks. "I brought you a present." I watch as he digs around in his pack that's proven to be filled with wonderful things and pulls out two items I've missed desperately.

Fat, heavy tears well in my eyes and roll down my face. I choose this moment to let it all sink in. I'm no longer alone. We can be a family.

Atticus kneels in front of me and then pulls me to him. I remain locked in his embrace for what feels like a glorious eternity. He strokes my hair and mutters promises I feel deep in my bones until my tears dry up. I'm ready to use his gifts. I want to brush my teeth.

"Let's go," I tell him as I take the toothbrush and toothpaste. "I want to clean up and then I just want you to hold me. I'm so tired."

"I know, Eve. I know."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

atticus

I have her.

I finally have her.

My chest no longer aches but burns instead. I'm filled up with her. Every empty hole inside overflows with sweet Eve. My woman. My wife.

For four months, I searched for her. Miles and miles and miles I covered. Every so often, I'd come across evidence that she'd been close. Her stinky dog's shits were easy to follow. But I was always just too far behind. Or I'd lose their trail and spend hours circling the same areas. Every night spent without her, a small part of me was erased. The human side of myself was giving up so the animal could take over. I needed to find her.

I'd been probably a mile away when I heard the gunshots. Never ran so fast in my entire life. And then, as if he knew I was coming, BB came out of nowhere barking.

When I walked up on them, I cracked.

Saw red.

Blood red.

His blood.

I wanted it. I wanted his blood for even daring to look at my Eve.

With a well-aimed throw, I launched that ax. Watched with glee as it split open his skull. And then, I had my girl back.

All my thoughts dissipate the moment Eve sheds her shirt on the river banks. BB has already jumped into the river and is splashing around happily. My eyes fixate on the scar on her back. Where that motherfucker shot her. I'm seeing red all over again when she turns.

Fuller breasts than I remember. Pink, mottled scars from the bear attack months and months ago. And a swollen belly, filled with my child. As she pushes her jeans down and gets completely nude, an alpha need to claim her possesses me. I quickly rip off my clothes and prowl over to her. My little fox doesn't run. Instead, she remains waiting.

"Mine," I growl, my palms going to her fleshy ass.

She snakes her arms up my chest and loops them at my neck. I lift her before carrying her out into the river. It's chilly, but it feels good. Invigorating. Clean. Like we might wash away our lonely past of being separated and start fresh. I like that idea.

I dunk us and when we reemerge from the water, she laughs. Best sound on Earth. I fuse my lips to hers and taste her now minty-flavored tongue. I'd never seen someone so happy to brush their teeth. We kiss as I walk us deeper. With only our heads sticking out of the water, we kiss at a slower pace. Enjoying each other. Reconnecting.

Goddamn I've missed her.

I might have once been plagued by the fact she's blood to me. It damn near destroyed me. But then, after my talk with Dad, something shifted. I realized I didn't care. She was my Eve and always would be. Nothing would stop me from having her.

It took forever to get back to her, but I would've searched until my last, dying breath if that's what it took to see her pretty smile one last time.

"I like this between us," I mutter against her soft, pillow lips. "This baby we made."

I feel her smile against mine. "Me too."

I'm hard despite the cold water rushing around us. Not even cold ass water will keep me from claiming my woman. My wife. Mine. I reach between us and probe at her pussy with the head of my dick. She whimpers and wiggles until her warmth slides down around me. A hiss of pleasure escapes me. With my hands on her hips, I bounce her nearly weightless body along my aching shaft. Her kisses become needy and starved. I kiss her back with the same intensity—probably more.

"Eve," I croak, nipping at her bottom lip. "I love you."

Her body clenches me hard. "I love you too."

I fuck, fuck, fuck Eve in the river until she's calling my name and I claim her by filling her up. And then I nuzzle my face in her wet hair and just inhale her.

Breathe her in.
Get drunk on her scent.
Thank God for giving her back to me.



The summer night has cooled, so I pull my naked, pregnant wife closer. The light from our fading fire allows us to see each other just enough in the dark tent. Blind Bear is curled up near the entrance of the tent already snoring.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, stroking my finger through her now dry hair. “I’m sorry for everything. I was an asshole for leaving you.”

“Yes.”

I chuckle. “You’re not supposed to agree.”

She giggles and then freezes. My heart stammers in my chest, fearing she heard a bear or something. Her hand encircles my wrist and she pulls my hand to her naked stomach. I splay my palm over the firm flesh.

“Feel. Our wild one is awake.”

When something pushes against my hand, I let out a choked sound. “T-That’s our baby?”

She nods, her smile wide and her eyes filled with tears. “Every single day I told the baby about you. About how wonderful and strong you are. How it’ll grow up to be just like you.”

The baby moves again. I rub my thumb along her skin, completely transfixed over the fact I can feel my child. It’s surreal. I’m overcome with happiness.

A dark cloud of worry passes over me.

The what-ifs.

All those incest books I read.

I’ll die if our child suffers. Fucking die.

“This one is strong just like you,” she assures me, somehow sensing my fears. “The others weren’t like this one.”

Others?

“What?”

Her brows furrow together. "Before...with Papa and my brothers. There were times we also created something. I called them my beings."

She got pregnant.

By her siblings and father.

"Four of them," she says, her bottom lip wobbling. "No bigger than the palm of my hand." A tear races down her cheek. "I named them Love, Mercy, Faith, and Goodness. They were mine even if they never took a breath. So weak and tiny." Her body trembles and I pull her close so I can keep her tight in my arms.

"You miscarried?"

"I don't know that term."

"The babies died while in your womb?"

"Y-Yes. They weren't babies. They never moved or breathed." She starts to cry and I hate that this woman has suffered so much pain in her life.

"Eve, beautiful, they were your babies. It's okay to say it. Just because they never lived doesn't change that fact. You had four babies that you would have done everything in your power to protect had they survived. You're going to be a great mother to our wild one."

She sniffles. "My babies." Another sob. "My babies."

"Yes," I croon. "They were yours. They'll always be yours. And when our little one is born, you'll get to see firsthand what a good mother you could have been to them."

"I want to visit them," she whispers. "They're buried by where the shack was. Can we visit them? My babies?"

I find her lips and press kisses to her supple mouth. "Of course we can."

Her palms cradle my cheeks and she stares at me as though I'm the most precious thing in the world. Love floods through me, hot, possessive, and wonderful.

"Love me always, Atticus."

"Always."

Our mouths meet for a frantic kiss as I roll onto my back, pulling her with me. It takes a few quick adjustments and then I'm deep inside her where I belong. She sits up and stares down at me. I take a moment to admire how fucking beautiful she is. Her dark hair hangs long over her perky breasts that have grown with her pregnancy. I admire her swollen

stomach that continues to grow each day with my child—my strong little baby. She licks her pink, puffy lips, making my dick twitch inside her.

I slide my fingers to her cunt and find her needy clit beneath her dark curls. She whimpers at my touch, sliding up and down along my throbbing cock. Her body is incredibly responsive. It only takes a few moments until she's exploding, my name a war cry on her lips. I grunt, my hips bucking up, as I find my own release. The desire to continue to fill her up until we're old and gray consumes me. I drain my love into her because it's all hers. Every last drop.

She slides off me and lies back down. I curl up behind her, my dripping cock nestled against the crack of her ass and my palm possessively stroking her stomach. We're nearly drifted off to sleep when Blind Bear drops one of his lethal bombs. It only takes a second for the tent to fill with his rancid ass stank.

"Smelly dog, smelly dog, what are they feeding you?" Eve sings in her best Phoebe voice.

I chuckle and then try not to gag. "No more beef jerky, dude. I don't care how sorry I feel for you. You kill us with that shit."

BB's tail swishes, knowing that we're talking to him, which only serves to send the smell fanning our way. Eve squeals and pulls the blanket over our heads. I bury my face in her sweet-smelling hair.

This is perfection.

Her. Our stinky ass dog. Our baby.

Perfect.



We should have left right away, but we didn't. We stayed for a month, simply enjoying each other and getting reacquainted. Eventually, we packed up our tiny camp and headed to her old shack.

Traveling with a pregnant woman has proven to be difficult. Though Eve is strong and resilient, she's only human. And this pregnancy is taking its toll on her. Some days she just wants to sleep. Our stops along the way have been long ones. If I were traveling alone, it would have taken me a

couple of weeks, not two months like it has when we decided to finally take our journey.

But we're finally here.

Her old shack is nothing but a rock, crumbling fireplace. The wood that once held it up is gone. Everything is gone. She doesn't seem upset about the home. Her interest is in the stones near the big tree. Fall is here and leaves cover the forest floor, an array of orange, brown, red, and yellow. She's already brushed away the leaves around the stones and kneels beside them. Her fingers walk along the stones as she smiles.

"My babies," she says. "All four of them."

I squat beside her, brushing my knuckles over her cheek to make sure she doesn't feel too cold. We've traveled long and far today. I'm sure she's exhausted.

"These, wild one, are your sisters," I tell our unborn baby.

She laughs. "Girls? How do you know?"

"I just feel like with those names you gave them, they were girl names." I kiss the top of her head. "You probably have another little girl inside you."

She shakes her head. "I feel like this one is a boy."

"Do you now? How come?"

"A hunch. Sometimes, I dream about him."

"Him." My heart squeezes. I hadn't really had a preference until now. Now, like her, I feel like it's a boy.

"While you set up camp, I'm going to look for the good sticks to make toys. I haven't made any for Devon and Reed's new baby yet," Eve says, standing.

I rise and give her a soft kiss on her cheek. "Be careful and holler if you need me."

She sets off and I start setting up camp. We're close to Reed and Devon's. Another half day of travel and we'll be at Reed's hunting cabin. Then, it's not far of a hike to their cabin on the cliff. Almost home.

I've just gotten the tent up and a fire started when I hear it.

Screams.

Blind Bear is gone and I hope to God he scares off whatever the hell is making her bellow like that. Yanking my Glock from my pants, I run toward her screaming. I find her at the bottom of an incline, curled over in pain, BB at her side.

"Eve!"

“Atticu—ahhh!”

She screams as I charge down the small hill to her.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” My hands roam all over her, assessing for damage.

“I had an—ahhh!” She curls up, hot tears leaking from her lids. “A pain and I slipped. I’ve been having them all day—ahhhh!”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Is the baby coming?” I demand, my heart in my throat.

“I think so—ahhh!”

I scoop her body into my arms and rush up the incline with BB on my heels. She continues to scream, barely getting any words out as I carry her to the tent.

“G-Get my pants off, Attic—ahhhh!” She sobs. “I can feel him. He’s coming out!”

Frantic, I begin ripping off her boots and jeans. When I see blood on her thighs, I nearly pass out. *Don’t fucking do that, asshole.* I swallow down the fear of her dying from childbirth and rip off her panties.

She wrenches her thighs apart and screams.

It’s then I see.

A head trying to come out.

Holy shit.

Holy fucking shit.

“Eve, baby, he’s coming. Holy fuck, he’s coming!”

She screams again and then his head slides out of her stretched opening, revealing to me the first glimpse of my child. My heart is in my throat, but I can’t stop to marvel over this miraculous moment. She needs my help. I need to deliver our son. Another scream pierces the air and more of the baby starts to come out. But then, it slides back into her, just the head sticking out.

“My God, our wild one is gorgeous, baby. You gotta keep pushing so you can see him too.”

She lets loose another blood-curdling scream and bears down. Over and over she does this as I coach her to keep pushing. At one point, she looks so purple in the face and fucking exhausted that I think she’ll give up.

Eve never gives up.

She’s a fighter.

A survivor.

A mother who'll do anything for her baby.

Screams pierce the air and she growls as she pushes our baby out. A boy. Just like she thought. He slides out of her body and into my waiting hands. I pull him against my chest. He's quiet. Too quiet. With probably a little too much force, I swat his bottom.

This time, the screams come from our boy.

Angry wails that fill my soul up and make it fucking sing.

Mine.

Ours.

We're a goddamn family.

Eve sobs, defeated and exhausted. I need to take care of her. She has a cord hanging out of her body and there's blood everywhere. We weren't prepared for this.

"Can you take your shirt off?" I ask as I kiss my son's wet, bloody head.

She manages to pull it off her body, revealing her breasts. I gently lay him against her. Her shaking hands pull him to her and she starts to cry. Once I have him covered with her shirt, I try to figure out what to do next.

"You're going to have to deliver the placenta," I tell her. "Then I'll get you cleaned up."

She grunts and groans, and then the blob comes out. Using my big knife, I hack through the cord, careful not to jostle our baby or hurt him. I work quickly to get her cleaned up so I can warm them up.

"He's so perfect," she whispers, fatigue in her voice.

"I knew he would be." Truth is, I worried every single day that there'd be something wrong with him. But there isn't. He's perfect and normal. Ours.

I cover them up with a blanket and then bring her a water bottle. Holding it up to her cracked lips, I help her drink it down. Once she's satisfied, I screw on the lid and then peek at my son.

A full head of dark hair like Eve.

"He's a big boy," I say, pride in my tone.

"Like his father."

"Are you a big boy like daddy?" I coo, stroking his sticky brown hair.

Eve's eyes are tender and water as she regards me. "Daddy. You're his daddy."

I can't help but grin. It feels fucking amazing to call him my son. "I am. Rest and see if you can get him to eat. I'll get something to bathe him

with.”

It sucks to have to leave them, but I do so I can warm water over the fire. While it heats, I bury the placenta away from camp so as not to attract any wild animals. Once I’ve cleaned up in the river, I rush back to my family. I bring the pot inside along with a rag, setting it beside me. In my backpack, I find a soft T-shirt I can swaddle our little one in once he’s clean.

“Did he eat?”

Eve nods. “I think so. He latched on. It hurt, so I’m guessing he found what he was after.”

“Can I wash him up?” I wet a cloth and then wring it out. It’s warm to the touch but not hot.

“Yes.”

I carefully take our tiny baby away from her. He easily fits in the crook of my arm. Quickly, I clean him off. His screams are loud as he protests at my actions. Once he’s no longer sticky with birth goo, I wrap him up in the shirt. He quickly settles, his eyes drooping. I scoot the pot closer to Eve. With my baby pressed against my chest in one arm, I use my other hand to clean his mother’s chest off. She’s falling fast asleep too. Before her eyes drift closed, I brush my thumb along her jaw.

“What do we name him?”

Her eyes open for a moment and then she smiles. “Wild.” She closes her eyes and falls asleep, leaving me with our wild one named Wild. It’s perfect considering where he was born.

“You hear that, little guy. Mommy said your name is Wild. You like that?”

He trembles in his sleep, his bottom lip pouting out. Jesus, he looks just like Eve when he does that. My heart is bursting with joy.

The night my son is born, I don’t sleep.

Not because he cries all night or I’m worried.

I don’t sleep because I stare at him. Stare and stare and stare, afraid to miss one second of seeing his perfect face.



One month later...

Snow dusts our face as we walk up the slippery steps. I keep one hand on Eve's lower back so she doesn't fall with Wild in her arms. After our son was born and Eve was able to walk, we made the trip to Reed's hunting cabin. It was good to stay in an actual home and gain our bearings. But Eve wanted to leave eventually, so we set out on our path to their house. Now that we're almost there, I'm giddy with excitement. I can't wait to show off our son.

A dog barking greets us at the top of the stairs, followed by a burly man. Reed. He lowers his .45 when he sees that it's us.

"Holy shit," he cries out, rushing down the steps to aid us. "I thought I'd never see you guys again." He stops to admire Wild. "Brought home a baby too."

"This is Wild," Eve says to him.

I grin at Reed. "Wild, that's your crazy uncle Reed."

Reed's grin is wide, revealing his bright white teeth. "Well, get your filthy asses into my house. You both look worn as hell and like you could use some bad bear stew."

Blind Bear barks because that fucker will eat anything.

He and Buddy take off sprinting toward the house. We all follow after them.

"Devon had her baby too," he tells us. "A little girl. Raegan."

"A girl finally," Eve says happily.

"Boy, I told you not to come out here," Reed calls out to Rowdy peeking around the gate.

He rushes ahead to his son. Eve stops me and turns to look up at me. Her brown eyes are fierce and loving. I could drown in her intense gaze. My mouth meets hers and I kiss her gently.

"Honey, we're home."

She smiles. "Not quite."

“You don’t want to stay here?”

“I want to visit. But then...” She sighs. “I want our son to be able to watch television and go to Muskies and see your family. I want to have hot showers and learn to read. I just want more for him than I had. Is that okay?”

I cradle her cheek and kiss her nose. “Eve, baby, we’ll give him the world. I’ll go wherever you want to go, because you’re my home. Your happiness is my happiness.” I give her a lopsided grin. “But can we both admit the real reason you want to go back to my house is so you can have more peanut butter?”

She laughs. “You caught me.”

“I’ll always catch you.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

eve

Six months later...

“God, Eve,” Will groans, covering his eyes. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to you doing that shit at the dinner table.”

I smirk. “My son has to eat. We’re eating. I don’t see the big deal.”

“Yeah, Will,” Judith chimes in, kissing Wild’s head. “Stop looking at Eve’s tits.”

“I, uh, I wasn’t—”

“Who’s looking at my wife’s tits?” Atticus growls as he enters his parents’ dining room with Abel, Evan, and Vic.

Will scowls, leaning back in his chair directly across from mine at the table. “I’m just saying, she doesn’t give any warning before she whips it out.”

“Dad,” Evan states with a chuckle. “It’s just a boob.”

Atticus leans down and kisses my head before running his fingertip along Wild’s cheek. Wild pops off my nipple to gaze up at his father, his green eyes gleaming with delight.

“You’re distracting him,” I chide, trying to get Wild to latch back on.

“And you’re distracting Will with your nipple,” Judith offers, not helpfully.

“I’m leaving.” Will pouts but makes no moves to actually leave.

Susan enters the dining room with her famous lasagna. It effectively distracts everyone from my breasts and Wild goes back to nursing. He tugs on my hair, his green eyes locked with mine.

He’s so precious.

I sometimes stare at him for hours.

Atticus teases me, but I catch him staring at him too.

Not long after we came back home, Atticus had his family over. I wore a white dress and Atticus wore a suit. In front of his family, we vowed our love to each other. At the end, we exchanged rings to bind our promises. It felt just like when Monica and Chandler got married. Two friends who were inseparable and in love. Atticus tells me not to believe everything I see on television, but I believe in them.

“So, Eve,” Abel says as he scoops some lasagna onto his plate. “Susan tells me you’re making great progress.”

I beam at him. “I’m reading *The Boxcar Children*.”

“Impressive. Good stories?”

“The best. I’ve been writing too, but I’m not that good at it.”

Susan waves off my comment. “Nonsense, hon. Your handwriting is beautiful. I’m impressed you’ve come this far in such a short time. Truly brilliant.”

“She never compliments me like that,” Judith grumbles, nudging me with her shoulder.

I can’t help but bask in her praise. I didn’t think Susan would want to help me, but when she overheard me asking Atticus about it, she offered to teach me. It’s a good thing too because her handwriting is legible unlike Atticus’s. His is messy. Every day she comes over to help with Wild and give me lessons. Sometimes she takes him for a walk or into town to give us some time alone. I never knew my grandparents, but I’m thankful Wild will know his.

When Wild is done suckling, he starts wiggling and crying. Evan hops out of his chair and rushes over to take him. They’re sweet. Wild’s eyes light up when he sees Evan and Evan acts like a proud big brother. I happily pass off the chunky baby to his cousin and then add some parmesan cheese to the lasagna Atticus put on my plate.

I’m happy.

Every day I wake up with that realization.

I love my life. How I wake up to a warm house and don’t have to start a fire to get it that way. That I can microwave food and eat it within minutes. Coffee. Peanut butter. M&Ms. There are so many foods I just don’t know how I lived without. As a result, I’ve gained weight. You can’t see my bones protruding anymore, which Atticus says is a good thing.

“I arrested Joey,” Will says around a mouthful of lasagna. Judith laughs. “Good.”

Joey—the guy she’d been seeing last year—had been with other women besides her. It really broke her heart. I couldn’t understand how someone would want to break Judith’s heart. She’s my best friend besides Atticus. Now she’s seeing a guy who works at the post office. Ben. She calls him boring all the time, but she gets a silly smile on her face when she says it. Boring is better than horrible Joey, who can’t keep his cock in one woman. Ben looks at Judith like she’s the only woman in the world.

“Where’s Ben?” Atticus asks, mimicking my thoughts.

“Fishing with his dad. He’ll be back tomorrow.”

They continue to babble and I find my stare locked on Evan. He smiles at Wild, stroking his fingers through his hair. It makes me hope that Wild will be a big brother one day and look at his siblings like Evan looks at him.

“We’re going to take Wild out to Reed and Devon’s in a few weeks,” Atticus says, earning the attention of everyone.

“W-What? Why?” Susan cries out. “You can’t take my baby boy away!”

“Ma,” Atticus grumbles. “Only for a visit. We’ll be gone a week tops.”

Susan frowns. “I still don’t think it’s safe out there.”

“Can I come?” Evan asks. “I’ve never been and you all talk so fondly of it. I could help with Wild too.”

“No,” Will snaps. “You have class.”

“Dad,” Evan grumbles. “I can talk to my professors. I’ll get the work done.”

“He can come,” Atticus says. “We don’t mind. I know Reed and Devon’s kids will love to see someone new.”

Will scowls but finally gives in. “Your grades better not suffer. You have a scholarship to a college I can in no way afford to pay for if you suddenly lose it.”

“I promise,” Evan says, grinning. “Did you hear that, little buddy? I get to come too.”

The rest of dinner goes like the usual Sunday night dinners we have at Atticus’s parents. Loud. Chaotic. Fun. We always finish with one of Susan’s homemade desserts. Tonight, it’s my favorite of hers. Peach cobbler.

After dinner, Susan steals Wild and cuddles him since she won’t see him for a whole week. I help Judith with the dishes while Atticus and the guys sit on the porch talking. Once we’re finished, I check on Wild, who’s

sleeping on his grandma's chest and then look for my husband. I pull on my coat and then find him with the others.

They all exchange smirks before heading back inside, leaving the two of us alone.

"Hey, beautiful," he says, grinning.

"Hey, handsome."

"Want to go for a walk?"

The air is crisp and cold, but I look forward to an evening walk with him. I offer my hand and he takes it. We walk behind the house and into the woods. It's quiet and calm. When we're hidden beyond the cover of the trees, he presses me against a big tree and kisses me hard.

"I missed you," he murmurs between kisses.

A giggle bubbles up my chest. "You were outside for five minutes."

"Twenty. And I can still miss you. Sometimes I can have you in my arms and still miss you."

"You're weird."

"You like it."

He trails kisses to my neck and gets me worked up with his mouth. My body floods with heat, the fire to have him burning at uncontrollable levels. I rake my fingers through his hair, undoing his neat man-bun and making it crazy, just the way I like it. He groans, his breath hot against my neck, when I tug at his golden strands.

"Are you really going to do this with your parents' house so close by?" I murmur, amused at his ravenous nature tonight.

"If they thought I was making them another grandbaby, I'm sure they'd approve."

With those words, he starts unbuttoning my jeans. His long fingers slide between my lips and find my clit. Whatever apprehension I may have had, melts away as he brings me pleasure. The air is nippy, but my body is flooded with heat. He pushes my jeans and panties down to my knees and then works his fingers faster. I bite on my lip, trying to hold back a loud moan. He brings me close to orgasm and then slides past my clit to push inside me.

"Asshole," I grumble.

He laughs and nips my neck. "I just needed to feel how wet you were." His finger probes inside me, looking to bring me pleasure there, too. He

finds the spot that makes my toes curl, and works it in a lazy, teasing way. He drives me insane.

“Just do it,” I beg. “Make me come.”

“So bossy.”

“Now.”

“Really fucking bossy.”

“Atticus...”

He laughs but obeys. His finger expertly brings me over the cliff of bliss. When he’s done, he pulls out his finger, grabs my hips, and twists me around.

“Hold on to the tree, woman.” He works at his belt behind me.

“Who’s bossy now?”

“Keep it up with that mouth and I’ll have to fill it.”

My cheeks burn hot. When we moved back home, he told me about blow jobs. I didn’t know this was a thing. But seeing the way the big, powerful man submitted to me the moment my mouth was on his cock, I became a big fan of the activity.

“I think you’d rather fuck me against the tree,” I taunt. He loves it when I talk dirty.

“Eve,” he growls, pressing his hard cock against the crack of my ass. “You’re going to scream for that comment.”

I smile as he pushes the head of his cock into my slick opening and then bucks his hips hard. I do scream. He stretches me and fills me in the most maddening way. My nails claw at the bark and I whine, pushing my ass against him. His fingers dig into my hips as he begins a hard, powerful thrusting cadence.

From his position behind me, it almost hurts. I like it, though. When he loses himself to the moment and handles me too roughly. Atticus says I like poking the bear. Mostly, I like when the bear pokes me.

“This,” he snarls against my ear as he cups my pussy, “is mine. Always will be.” Then his fingers are sliding between the lips, massaging the throbbing clit again.

Too much.

Too much pleasure.

My legs tremble, too weak to hold myself up any longer. He senses it and locks an arm around me, never skipping a beat with his wild thrusting. The fingers at my clit continue their torturous rhythm. When he brings me

to climax, stars glitter in front of me and I let loose a throaty scream. His heat gushes inside me, hot and claiming. It makes me hope again and again we'll have more babies. Like Reed and Devon. I want a big family like Atticus's. I don't want Wild to be the only child. I know how lonely it feels and don't wish that for him.

Atticus pulls out and his hot cum runs down my thighs. He takes care of me and pulls my clothes back up and into place. Once we're both decent, he pulls me against him, kissing my hair.

"I can't get enough of you, Eve. I don't think I ever will."

I smile and close my eyes as I inhale him. Atticus is everything to me. He befriended me when I was younger and looked out for me. Brought me fruit and tried to get me to talk. When I got hurt, I went to them, knowing full well Atticus was there. It was him I needed. He's all I'll ever need.

I was born wild, but caged and abused.

And with him, I was freed. He broke the chains around my heart and took it for his own. Rather than feel trapped or mistreated, I felt loved. He always made me feel that way. Now, more so than ever.

"Always yours," I whisper. "You ready to get our boy and go home?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm not done loving you. It might take all night."

I hope it takes forever.



One week later...

Eyes.

I feel them on me.

Staring.

I jolt awake and squint against the morning sun streaming in through Reed and Devon's guest room. Atticus is gone—probably off with Reed. I'm apparently being watched by two little Jamison boys.

They're not watching me because they think I'm interesting. They're watching because they're trying to sneak off with my baby.

Wild squeals with delight at seeing them.

Rowdy has been inching Wild down the bed away from me while Ronan keeps watch. I blink away my sleep and give them my mean stare.

“What are you doing?”

“We gonna play with Wild,” Ronan says. “Rowdy’s big. He watch him.” Then, the two-year-old gives me a silly, toothy grin.

“He needs to eat first. I can feed him and then come with you two.”

Ronan huffs. “No girls.”

I roll my eyes. From what Devon says, they’re not a fan of their new little sister Raegan.

“Tough shit,” I grumble, sitting up.

“No, you tough shit,” Ronan sasses back.

Rowdy giggles. “Ronan! Daddy’ll whip your butt!”

“And Eve!” he argues. “Eve said shit!”

“You said shit twice.” I arch a brow at him to argue with me.

“So did you,” Ronan says, sticking out his tongue.

“Can Evan come instead?” Rowdy asks, giving me a smile that reminds me of Devon’s.

As if on cue, a sleepy Evan walks into the room in his boxers. The kid is skinny. It’ll do him some good to be out here with us for a while. Between Reed and Atticus, they’ll put him to work and put some muscle on him.

“Boys meeting and I’m not allowed.” I pout, making Evan chuckle.

He saunters in and scoops up Wild. “Hear that, little buddy? We get to play with the boys.”

“He hasn’t eaten yet,” I grumble. “Or had a diaper change.”

Evan makes a face and hands him back. “Fine. But as soon as you take care of all that, we’ll be back. Come on, boys, let’s go get bacon.”

At the word bacon, BB hops up from the corner of the room and chases after them.

“These kids love you, Wild,” I tell my son as I change his diaper. “They’ll look after you like a big brother should. Every one of them.”

Wild’s green eyes bore into me. For such a small little thing, he gives such serious, adult like glares. I pull down my shirt and latch him to my breast. He suckles and watches me, his fingers grabbing at my hair. The boy is a hair puller and if you’re not careful, he’ll rip a whole handful out. I stroke my fingers through his dark hair and admire him. Mornings are my favorites. Just like when he was in the womb, I tell him all the things I want him to know.

“You’re strong, Wild. Just like your daddy. Sweet and kind and loving. You’re going to grow up to be a good man.”

Wild’s chin moves with each gulp of milk.

“And one day, you’ll fall in love too. One day you’ll have a family of your own. Be good to them. Love them with your whole heart, unapologetically so.”

The floorboard creaks, stealing both mine and Wild’s attention. In the doorway stands the man I love. Strong. Powerful. Good.

“We were just talking about you,” I say with a smile.

“Don’t let me interrupt.” He smirks. “Go on. Continue on about how goddamn hot I am.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ll tell you how hot you are later.”

Wild pulls off my nipple and tries to roll out of my arms toward the sound of his daddy’s voice. Atticus melts and a goofy grin spreads over his face. He walks over to the bed and stretches out beside us. Wild lets loose a happy squeal when his father pulls him to him.

Time stops, freezing this moment for us. My son tugs at Atticus’s hair and beard, making him playfully cry out in faux pain. Wild gets a thrill over hurting his daddy and giggles like crazy.

I thought nothing could be better than *Friends* or peanut butter or coffee.

I was wrong.

The End

OceanofPDF.com

PLAYLIST

Listen on Spotify [here](#).

“Wildest Ones” by Zayde Wolf

“Love is Mystical” by Cold War Kids

“Daddy Issues” by The Neighbourhood

“Love on the Brain” by Cold War Kids and Bishop Briggs

“Born to be Wild” by Steppenwolf

“Bad at Love” by Halsey

“Not Afraid Anymore” by Halsey

“Where is My Mind?” by Pixies

“Glycerine” by Bush

“Judith” by A Perfect Circle

“Girls Go Wild” by LP

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my husband...you see the day in and day out of EVERYTHING. You're my rock, my cheerleader, and shoulder to lean on. Love you bunches, honey!

I am so thankful for all my wild ones. Without you guys, writing would be a lot less fun. You cheered me on and supported me through *The Wild*, and I know you'll continue to do that with whatever story I take on next because you're all badassess like that. Don't ever change. Be strong and fiery and brave!

Big thanks to Robyn Crawford and Eden Books for giving books like *The Free* a home. In case anyone doesn't know what "home" means, it means a place where you feel safe to be you, feel loved unconditionally, and can thrive without judgment or hate. I'm proud to be a part of the Eden Books community. Eden Books has given me a home when no other place would. And that will never be forgotten.

A huge thank you to my Krazy for K Webster's Books reader group. You all are insanely supportive and I can't thank you enough.

A gigantic thank you to those who always help me out behind the scenes. Elizabeth Clinton, Ella Stewart, Misty Walker, Holly Sparks, Jillian Ruize, Gina Behrends, and Wendy Rinebold—you ladies are my rock!

Thank you so much to Misty Walker for encouraging me through *The Wild* and cheering me on through *The Free*. Your friendship is invaluable. Irreplaceable. Incredible. I love you more than you'll ever know.

A big thank you to my author friends who have given me your friendship and your support. You have no idea how much that means to me.

Thank you to all of my blogger friends both big and small that go above and beyond to always share my stuff. You all rock! #AllBlogsMatter

Emily A. Lawrence, thank you SO much for editing this book. You rock!!

Thank you, Stacey Blake, for making this book gorgeous! You're a star and I love you bunches!

A big thanks to Nicole Blanchard with Indie Sage PR for holding my hand every step of the way during the wildest legs of my journey. Your friendship, support, and steadiness has helped me get through some tough times. I'm so thankful for you!

Lastly but certainly not least of all, thank you to all of the wonderful readers out there who are willing to hear my story and enjoy my characters like I do. It means the world to me!

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT AUTHOR

k webster



K Webster is a *USA Today* Bestselling author. Her titles have claimed many bestseller tags in numerous categories, are translated in multiple languages, and have been adapted into audiobooks. She lives in “Tornado Alley” with her husband, two children, and her baby dog named Blue. When she’s not writing, she’s reading, drinking copious amounts of coffee, and researching aliens.

Keep up with K Webster

[Newsletter](#)

[Website](#)

[Email](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Instagram](#)

[BookBub](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

BOOKS BY k webster

Psychological Romance Standalones:

[*My Torin*](#)

[*Whispers and the Roars*](#)

[*Cold Cole Heart*](#)

[*Blue Hill Blood*](#)

[*Wicked Lies Boys Tell*](#)

Romantic Suspense Standalones:

[*Dirty Ugly Toy*](#)

[*El Malo*](#)

[*Notice*](#)

[*Sweet Jayne*](#)

[*The Road Back to Us*](#)

[*Surviving Harley*](#)

[*Love and Law*](#)

[*Moth to a Flame*](#)

[*Erased*](#)

Extremely Forbidden Romance Standalones:

[*The Wild*](#)

[*Hale*](#)

Like Dragonflies

Taboo Treats:

[*Bad Bad Bad*](#)

[*Coach Long*](#)

[*Ex-Rated Attraction*](#)

[*Mr. Blakely*](#)

[*Easton*](#)

[*Crybaby*](#)

[*Lawn Boys*](#)

[*Malfeasance*](#)

[*Renner's Rules*](#)

[*The Glue*](#)

[*Dane*](#)

[*Enzo*](#)

[*Red Hot Winter*](#)

[*Dr. Dan*](#)

KKinky Reads Collection:

[*Share Me*](#)

[*Choke Me*](#)

[*Daddy Me*](#)

[*Watch Me*](#)

[*Hurt Me*](#)

Contemporary Romance Standalones:

[Wicked Lies Boys Tell](#)

[The Day She Cried](#)

[Untimely You](#)

[Heath](#)

[Sundays are for Hangovers](#)

[A Merry Christmas with Judy](#)

[Zeke's Eden](#)

[Schooled by a Senior](#)

[Give Me Yesterday](#)

[Sunshine and the Stalker](#)

[Bidding for Keeps](#)

[B-Sides and Rarities](#)

[Conheartists](#)

Paranormal Romance Standalones:

[Apartment 2B](#)

[Running Free](#)

[Mad Sea](#)

[Cold Queen](#)

War & Peace Series:

[This is War, Baby \(Book 1\)](#)

[This is Love, Baby \(Book 2\)](#)

[This Isn't Over, Baby \(Book 3\)](#)

[This Isn't You, Baby \(Book 4\)](#)

[*This is Me, Baby_ \(Book 5\).*](#)
[*This Isn't Fair, Baby_ \(Book 6\).*](#)
[*This is the End, Baby_ \(Book 7—a novella\).*](#)

Lost Planet Series:

[*The Forgotten Commander \(Book 1\)*](#)
[*The Vanished Specialist \(Book 2\)*](#)
[*The Mad Lieutenant \(Book 3\)*](#)
[*The Uncertain Scientist \(Book 4\)*](#)
[*The Lonely Orphan \(Book 5\)*](#)
[*The Rogue Captain \(Book 6\)*](#)

2 Lovers Series:

[*Text 2 Lovers \(Book 1\)*](#)
[*Hate 2 Lovers \(Book 2\)*](#)
[*Thieves 2 Lovers \(Book 3\)*](#)

Pretty Little Dolls Series:

[*Pretty Stolen Dolls \(Book 1\)*](#)
[*Pretty Lost Dolls \(Book 2\)*](#)
[*Pretty New Doll \(Book 3\)*](#)
[*Pretty Broken Dolls \(Book 4\)*](#)

The V Games Series:

[*Vlad \(Book 1\)*](#)
[*Ven \(Book 2\)*](#)
[*Vas \(Book 3\)*](#)

Four Fathers Books:

[Pearson](#)

Four Sons Books:

[Camden](#)

Elite Seven Books:

[Gluttony](#)

[Greed](#)

Royal Bastards MC:

[Koyn](#)

Truths and Lies Duet:

[Hidden Truths](#)

[Stolen Lies](#)

Books Only Sold on K's Website and Eden Books:

[The Wild](#)

The Free

[Hale](#)

[Bad Bad Bad](#)

[This is War, Baby \(Book 1\)](#)

Like Dragonflies

The Breaking the Rules Series:

[Broken \(Book 1\)](#)
[Wrong \(Book 2\)](#)
[Scarred \(Book 3\)](#)
[Mistake \(Book 4\)](#)
[Crushed \(Book 5 – a novella\)](#)

The Vegas Aces Series:

[Rock Country \(Book 1\)](#)
[Rock Heart \(Book 2\)](#)
[Rock Bottom \(Book 3\)](#)

The Becoming Her Series:

[Becoming Lady Thomas \(Book 1\)](#)
[Becoming Countess Dumont \(Book 2\)](#)
[Becoming Mrs. Benedict \(Book 3\)](#)

Alpha & Omega Duet:

[Alpha & Omega \(Book 1\)](#)
[Omega & Love \(Book 2\)](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)